

# ASEEES NewsNet



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**Cover Photo:** Screenshot from Soviet melodrama "Zhurnalists" (dir. Sergey Gerasimov, 1967). ASEEEES is grateful to Serguei A. Oushakine for suggesting this image.

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# Let's Get Melodramatic: Studying the Genre All Over the Globe

by Daisuke Adachi

In this essay, I examine recent attempts to build international collaboration in melodrama studies in SEEES. Reading the previous sentence, you might say: Why melodrama? A seemingly banal, outdated field - is it worth studying? Thus, firstly, I explain why we need melodrama studies in SEEES.

Melodrama was the most popular theatrical genre in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century, but became obsolete in the twentieth century when cinema replaced it as a new popular entertainment medium. In his monumental work, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976), Peter Brooks found in melodrama, which had long been forgotten as a genre of popular theater, the modern imagination that nurtured nineteenth-century classic novels. The fundamental characteristics of the melodramatic imagination, he writes, are moral occult and emotional excess. The melodramatic mode as the “desire to express all” was supposed to reveal and exhibit brightly to the rising bourgeoisie the order hidden in chaotic post-revolutionary France. Brooks suggests that this emotion-centered, subjectivized moral feeling, however tentative and ephemeral it may be, served as a guiding principle for people in modern times about how to live in the world where the sacred had been lost.

Bridging high and low/popular/mass cultures, melodrama as a concept has been accepted and developed in film studies in the United States, especially in the study of Hollywood cinema, which required theoretical and methodological support for its institutionalization in universities and academia in the 1970s. In recent years, the study of the melodramatic imagination has been expanded and modified in various ways by more detailed historical, gender, political, and other studies. As it gained scholarly attention in humanities, relocated and revived in the context of emotion/affect studies, the Occidentalism



Daisuke Adachi with collaborators at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center (SRC) at Hokkaido University in Japan.

of melodrama studies, which has focused exclusively on Western countries, is currently being subjected to critical reexamination, and melodrama research has spread to non-Western countries as well, including Japan. However, melodrama studies have not yet seen substantial development in the cultural studies of the Slavic, East European, and Eurasian region since the publication of the monumental *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia* in 2002. This volume, edited by Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger, remains the only comprehensive work in this research field written in English on the topic over 20 years after its publication.

There are two main reasons for the state of the research. First, high culture and low/popular/mass culture have historically been studied separately, and the gap between these two cultural fields is still widening, based implicitly or explicitly on a tradition in which literature has been privileged in comparison with other cultural genres, media, or fields. There has been no demand for melodrama studies, which bridges high and low/popular/mass cultures by studying them from a unified perspective. Second, a persistent view of Russian culture as idiosyncratic has made it difficult to appropriate melodrama studies, which has long been studied mainly in the US and Europe, to the SEEE

region, nor to make a comparison between Russia and elsewhere in the region in terms of melodrama culture.

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In 2019, I launched a collective research project entitled “A Comprehensive Study on the Melodramatic Imagination in Russian and Former Soviet Culture,” funded by a Japanese government grant ([Kakenhi](#)) for five years. Nine other Japanese researchers joined me to study Imperial Russian and Soviet melodramatic culture from the late eighteenth century through the collapse of the USSR, covering diverse genres (literature, theater, cinema—including the 1967 film “Zhurnalist,” from which the cover image is captured—ballet, opera, operetta, and musical, popular/mass culture) and topics (melodrama and revolution, Soviet and post-Soviet melodrama).

Our primary objectives are to organize an international symposium and to publish an edited volume in English based on its results. The first opportunity for our group to gather was provided by the International Council for Central and East European Studies (ICCEES) Congress that was originally scheduled to be held in 2020 in Montreal. We had crucial support from two scholars—Katherine Bowers (University of British Columbia) and Marina Balina (Illinois Wesleyan University). Katherine Bowers had been already invited to Japan within the framework of Hokkaido University’s research exchange program with University of British Columbia to present at two workshops on the problem of emotion in literature, which I had organized in Sapporo and Tokyo in March 2019. She connected me with several young specialists in the study of Dostoevsky and other areas of 19th century literature such as Kirill Zubkov, Vadim Shneyder, Margarita Vaysman, and others as potential speakers for our melodrama panels. Meanwhile, Evgeny Dobrenko, who was staying at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center (SRC) at Hokkaido University as an [FVFP](#)

visiting professor in 2019, introduced me to Marina Balina as a potential collaborator. Although the 2020 Montreal Congress was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we kept in contact and preparing for next year via e-mail and Zoom, which had just begun to be widely used at academic meetings (however hard it is to believe today). We held four panels on Russian and Soviet melodrama at the ICCEES Congress, which was held online in 2021: Russian Classics Towards the Melodrama - In Search of the Theatricality; Realism and Melodrama in Dostoevsky and Tolstoy; Melodrama and Love in Russian and Soviet Literature and Culture; and Melodrama and the Boundaries of the Genre: Language, Body, and Nation.

this level and scale of international collaboration between Japanese researchers and English-speaking specialists... has scarcely been seen in the past

Since then, our international collaboration has continued developing, supported by Marina Balina and her incredible ability to attract fantastic researchers and facilitate academic communication through broad academic networks. In August 2022, we organized an international symposium at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center





Adachi and collaborators at a 'beer party' in Tokyo.

(SRC) at Hokkaido University entitled, “Melodrama and Melodramatic Imagination in Russia: New Perspectives,” joined by, in addition to the aforementioned collaborators, scholars such as Katerina Clark, Larissa Rudova, Mark Lipovetsky, Serguei Oushakine, Elena Prokhorova and Alexander Prokhorov, and film scholar Anna Toropova, who had just published *Feeling Revolution: Cinema, Genre, and the Politics of Affect Under Stalin* (2020). The conference in Sapporo was followed by two roundtables forums: “Childhood in Russia: Yesterday and Today. New Approaches to Children’s Literature and Culture” (at Osaka University) and “Languages of War in Russian Culture from the Nineteenth to the Twenty First Century: Continuity or Conflict?” (at the University of Tokyo). Currently, Marina Balina and I are editing a collected volume in English based on the achievements of the collaboration, especially those of the symposium in Sapporo.

This level and scale of international collaboration between Japanese researchers and English-speaking specialists in the field of literature and culture of SEES has scarcely been seen in the past. In the remainder of this article, I would like to expand on this point, focusing on the challenges and advantages of building international collaboration in melodrama studies and beyond.

Our project has two major challenges. The first is concerned with the situation of literature and culture studies of SEES in Japan. Since modernization (in this context almost identical to westernization) began with the start of Meiji era in 1868, Russian literature has retained a privileged status in Japanese culture and society. It was one of the models followed by modern Japanese literature, which leading writers and critics at that time regarded nascent and still to be formed. An enduring image of Russian literature’s moralistic value—both as an opinion leader in a society not succumbing to suppressing power and as a tool for education and the cultivation of the self—was only reinforced by the binary opposition between the East and the West through the twentieth century. This perception remains in Japanese society even today, although it has been mitigated considerably.

“Russia” and “Literature” have also both long enjoyed a monopoly in SEES in Japan, where a substantial part of research activity has been allotted to translation and introduction of Russian literature. Japanese society has a huge and matured domestic reading market exclusively dominated by the Japanese language. Researchers focused on Russian literature have published their achievements mainly in Japanese, although referring to the previous studies published in Russian, and, to a lesser extent, in English. Japanese specialists in Russian literature have scarcely been compelled to pursue international collaborations with foreign scholars (with the exception of Russophone world) since Japanese is, although minor in comparison to English, major enough to allow complex academic communication and broad circulation of knowledge in the domestic reading public. English is far from being widely used in Japanese daily life, which creates further challenges for SEES in Japan as a whole. It should also be noted that in recent years, the long-term stagnation of the Japanese economy, chronic depreciation of the yen, and shrinking university budgets have discouraged graduate students and researchers from pursuing research abroad.

This history and the contemporary context have kept Japanese scholars’ research in the field of SEES literature and culture somewhat isolated from English-speaking academia, reducing communication and collaboration. Another factor, arguably one of the most serious reasons for the disconnection of Japanese SEES from English-speaking world, is that studies of contemporary visual media, rather developed in the US and Europe, is little

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known and essentially sporadic in Japanese SEEES: indeed, there are only a very limited number of specialists in SEEES film studies in Japan.

This isolation of Japanese academia from the English-speaking world is damaging to SEEES as a whole.

Substantial achievements in Japanese make an important contribution to SEEES as a third-party perspective, neither in English nor in the local languages. Moreover, Japan's experience of translating foreign culture(s), including Russian and other SEEES regions, should be shared and critically studied in broader context outside Japan, perhaps leading to a more multifaceted and nuanced understanding of cultural translation and communication in SEEES and beyond.

The second challenge we face in our international collaboration is the question of how to make relevant the study of Russian and Soviet melodrama to a broader context. Japanese academia's particular focus on "Russia" and "Literature" should be critically reinvestigated from this perspective as well. As mentioned earlier, a focus on melodrama studies in SEEES can help us demythologize narratives purporting the uniqueness or originality of Russian culture, interrogate the Occidentalism of melodrama studies, and question the banal yet persistent binary opposition between East and West. After Russia's devastating full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022, the task has never been more relevant.

With this in mind, we are currently designing two further research projects to decolonize the hegemony of "Russia" and "Literature" in SEEES cultural studies in Japan. The first is entitled "Melodramatic Culture in the Post-Socialist World" and explores melodramatic affect and emotion to understand the relationship between culture and politics under Putin's regime. This will be the first comprehensive and comparative investigation of how the contemporary melodramatic cultures of Russia and other formerly socialist countries and regions, particularly Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and Central Asia, have evolved. The second project will explore the historical role of melodramatic

adaptation/reception of Russian literature in the process of formation of national culture in Russia, Japan, and Israel. This is the first attempt to compare the formation of national culture in these three countries through the reception of Russian literature. Melodramatization represents a significant step in this process, facilitating the circulation of works of Russian literature across diverse cultural areas, helping to (re)articulate boundaries between national, high and low/popular/mass cultures.

The general and relative lack of mutual communication between SEEES in Japan and in English-speaking world has long supported the enduring primacy of "Russia" and "Literature" in Japanese SEEES. In recent years, however, we have witnessed signs of change. Researchers have explored possibilities for more enduring international collaborations in English. These include the work of Ariko Kato, a Polish literature scholar focusing on representations of Auschwitz; of Masumi Kameda, comparing Soviet and US propaganda; of Risa Matsuo, studying the relationship between Polish music and literature; and of Anna Nakai, addressing the post-war cultural history of Central and Eastern Europe. We hope to connect these nascent movements that seem sporadic but are so vital, promoting open international dialogue and collaboration.

In 2021, commemorating the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the USSR, the Japan Association for the Study of Russian Language and Literature held a symposium devoted to the issues of (post)-Soviet memory in the society



Adachi and collaborators with film historian Oksana Bulgakowa in Kyoto.

and culture of the former Soviet countries and regions: Tatarstan, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Latvia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Association organized, during its annual conference, a symposium to compare the resistance culture in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, and the Czech Republic, as well as a workshop titled "Ukraine and Russia from a Perspective of Literary History." In 2023, SRC invited three speakers from the US, Amelia Glaser, Yuliya Ilchuk, and Ana Hedberg Olenina, to hold a session on Ukrainian culture within the framework of the special international symposium dedicated to a year on from the outbreak of war, followed by the workshops on related topics in Tokyo and Kyoto. Subjects such as Ukrainian language and literature, Azerbaijani literature, Soviet Thaw cinema, and the cinema of Central Asia, are currently studied by several graduate students, and what is possibly the first book in Japanese on modern Georgian literature was recently published by Hayate Sotome, featuring eco-criticism and postcolonial theory analysis.

## encounter and collaboration...made me so much more aware of the diversity and richness of the world

One of the most significant advantages of international collaboration is what I will call "encounter." It is hard to believe that I am now working with the researchers whose names I knew only on paper. Moreover, there are so many researchers in the world who are working on exciting research that I would never have known otherwise! Encounter and collaboration with these outstanding scholars, both emerging and established, has made me so much more aware of the diversity and richness of the world. Encounter with diverse research in terms of topics, analytical methods, media, genres, periods, regions, and so on is also essential. For example, our melodramatic project provided a fascinating opportunity to tackle non-literature genres and periods that have not been studied sufficiently in Japan. However, I have to admit that two essential genres for melodrama studies, ballet and opera, remain largely unexplored at the present time and further research is required.

Lastly, I would like to offer an example of the difficulties of encounter. As a nonnative speaker, I have faced all kinds of problems communicating in English. However, to feel such difficulties "defamiliarizes" otherwise mundane days, pushing me to cross the border into a new, thrilling world. I am so enjoying the feeling of difficulties brought about by international collaboration and hope that I am not the only one experiencing this.



**Daisuke Adachi** is an Associate Professor at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, Hokkaido University. He teaches Russian literature and culture. His research is broadly concerned with reinterpreting and rewriting the history of representation in 19th-century Russian literature—rethinking the literature as media, especially in terms of language, image, body, and technical conditions. His work ranges from the poetics of Gogol and media of his time to Russian romantic irony, Karamzin's geo-cultural concept of translation, and Soviet theories of piano playing. His latest work includes "Iazyk i poetika Gogolia v trudakh V. V. Vinogradova po istorii russkovo literaturnovo iazyka," in *Grammatika v obschestve, obschestvo v grammatike: Issledovaniia po normativnoi grammatike slavianskikh iazykov*, eds. by Motoki Nomachi and Shiori Kiyosawa (Moscow: IaSK, 2021), pp. 99-124; "Melodrama and War after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," in *Japanese Slavic and East European Studies* Vol. 43, 2023, pp. 13-26 (forthcoming), and others. He is co-editing (with Evgeny Dobrenko) a special issue of *Acta Slavica Iapponica*, where he has served as a member of the editorial committee since 2018. Daisuke serves as a member of International Nineteenth-Century Studies Association (INCSA) advisory board and of Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies International (CNCSI) steering committee. His current research topic is melodramatic imagination in Russian and Japanese culture.

# 55th Annual ASEEES Convention

Nov. 30 - Dec. 3, 2023 - Philadelphia, PA  
 Oct. 19 - 20, 2023 - Virtual

Join ASEEES in celebrating its 75th anniversary  
 at the 2023 Convention!

Convention theme: [Decolonization](#)



## Virtual Convention

ASEEES members can watch recorded panels and roundtables from the 2023 Virtual Convention (October 19-20) on the [convention site](#) until December 4, 2023.

## Philadelphia, PA

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This year, ASEEES awarded over 100 grants to support travel to the convention.



When you arrive at the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown, registration is on the 5th floor.

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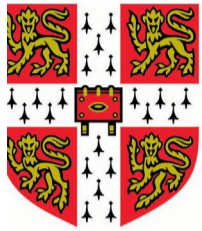


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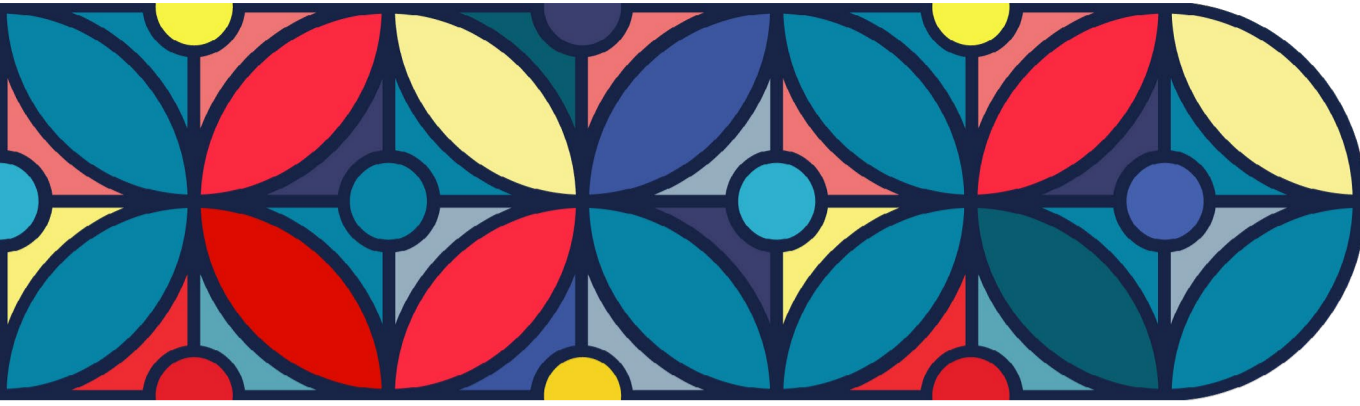
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# 56th Annual ASEEES Convention

November 21-24, 2024

Boston Marriott Copley Place

## Convention Theme: Liberation

2024 ASEEES President: Vitaly Chernetsky, University of Kansas

Building on the productive discussions stimulated by the 2023 theme, decolonization, we offer liberation as the 2024 focus. Dictionary definitions of liberation's spectrum of meanings include "being set free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression," "the achievement of equal rights and status," "being freed from domination by a foreign power," and "release from social stereotyping." It can refer both to the act of liberating or the state of being liberated. Human history offers us multiple examples of movements advocating social change that use this term, including women's liberation, Black liberation, gay liberation, and many others. The term gave us a different way of approaching spirituality, by focusing, in liberation theology, on the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. In his book *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o proposes as a decolonizing goal the "search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and other selves in the universe."

There are many potential paths to such a liberating perspective. One of them emerges when an individual or a group works to overcome stereotyping labels applied to them by others, or by society as a whole; in doing so, they find liberation within themselves. When a group, or even an individual, that places labels on others makes an effort to look deeper into the person or group being stereotyped, this leads to a liberation of knowledge about the world around them. The practice of liberation thus is inextricably linked with overcoming various forms of epistemic injustice. Critical epistemology has made significant advances in recent years, and thus we have become much more sensitive to the ways in which structures of knowledge systems and social power can marginalize or silence some perspectives or reveal gaps in collective interpretive resources.

As our field is engaged in a profound reexamination of its history, of many previously held assumptions, and of systemic imbalances that led to the marginalization and silencing of many critical perspectives, the ASEEES Annual Convention provides a platform for us to engage in constructive discussion and formulate a vision for a more just, un-stereotyped, equality-minded, inclusive research agenda in Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies. This engagement can help us proactively seek out previously silenced and marginalized perspectives, and address instances of epistemic injustice both on an individual and on the systemic level. Russia's current domestic authoritarian turn and neocolonial wars of aggression include not only physical violence, but also epistemic violence, an active agenda toward cultural destruction and an imposition of unfreedom. Engaging in a process of intellectual liberation is a crucial part of counteracting that. Liberation as a theme has the potential to lead us to discover and constructively address forms of marginalization or silencing within our field that we may not have noticed before and help create a more inclusive epistemic climate within Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies on both the macro and micro levels. We invite colleagues to explore these and related possibilities in themes across all disciplines and historical periods.

**Deadline: March 1, 2024**

Submissions open early January 2024



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### **ABOUT THE SHORT TERM RESEARCH GRANT COMPETITION**

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### **ABOUT THE DISSERTATION COMPLETION GRANT**

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Funding for all programs is provided by the Title VIII Program of the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research.



# An Environment for People-to-People Diplomacy: Impressions from the Aral Sea Summer School

by Sarah Cameron

This year marked the fifth anniversary of the [Kazakh German University \(DKU\) Aral Sea summer school](#). The ten-day program, which is targeted at young Central Asians and Afghans working or studying in fields related to water, offers students an introduction to the challenges facing residents of the [Priaral'e, or Aral Sea region](#), a vast area that encompasses parts of present-day Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Once one of the world's largest inland bodies of water, the Aral Sea began to shrink dramatically in the 1960s when Soviet officials directed an increasing amount of water towards cotton production. As a result of the declining water levels, the climate and ecology of the surrounding region changed. People who lived near the sea began to experience a dramatic increase in health problems and the sea's once vibrant fishing industry collapsed. In 2005, the World Bank sponsored the construction of a dam that led to the partial restoration of water levels on the Kazakhstani side.

In recent years, however, rising temperatures ([the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has determined that Central Asia is one of the world regions most exposed to climate change](#)) and increasing water demands from upstream countries, have left the future of the region and its residents uncertain. The Aral Sea disaster cannot be resolved by the efforts of any one state. The "[Aral Sea basin](#)," the drainage basin for the Aral Sea, encompasses a vast area that includes most of Central

Asia plus parts of northern Afghanistan and Iran. Though national divisions have inflamed the crisis (some Kazakhs blame Uzbekistan's reliance on cotton for the Aral Sea's demise), cooperation among different nations is also widely understood as vital to managing the region's water issues. Soon after the Soviet collapse, for instance, the five Central Asian states formed the [International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea \(IFAS\)](#) to facilitate collaboration on issues relating to the Aral Sea.

The summer school brings the concept of regional cooperation down to the more basic level of people-to-people diplomacy. Roughly twenty students from across Central Asia and Afghanistan are selected for participation through an open competition. Those chosen are fully funded (past supporters of the summer school have included the Barsa-Kelmes nature preserve, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), the German Foreign Ministry, and IFAS), and the very format of the summer school, which includes camping, yurt stays, and long train and car rides, encourages collaborative thinking and close communication. Friendships form and, if the lively summer school student text group I joined is any indication, endure well beyond the summer school itself. Indeed, according to some sources, the program has even resulted in at least one marriage.



*Sarah Cameron and summer school participants at Kyzylorda Airport*

An ambitious program of regional exchange like this is difficult to pull off. There is the basic question of logistics: getting all of us to Almaty, where DKU is based, was an enormous undertaking for the university's staff, not to mention coordinating our onward journey to the Aral Sea. Plans for meetings in the region shifted frequently and it felt like there was always a DKU or IFAS staff member on their cell phone, heroically trying to rearrange our schedules yet again. Another challenge was the issue of finding a common language: some students felt more comfortable in Russian, while others preferred English. We ended up speaking a mix of both. It was also tough to ensure full regional representation. Despite Turkmenistan's importance to regional water issues, there was no student in the group from that country. DKU instructors later told me that participants from Turkmenistan are often denied the necessary permission to leave the country.

Over the course of the ten-day summer school, students met with local experts and civil society organizations and toured sites in the Aral Sea region on the Kazakhstani side of the border. This isn't easy travel by any means. The distances in this region are vast, and the transportation systems are poorly developed. Aral'sk, the former port on the Kazakhstani side of the sea, is a 24-hour trip by express train from Almaty. Trips from Aral'sk to former fishing villages and the dried-up seabed can be similarly demanding. For the most part, there are no roads or amenities; the trips require four-wheel drive vehicles, as well as patience for long bumpy rides. We all became adept at hiding behind scrawny *saxsaul* trees to use the facilities.

The environmental conditions in the region are harsh:

During our trips out from Aral'sk, our eyes began to water and my nose ran constantly, most likely a reaction to the dust and other particles from the former seabed that hung in the air. I found sand inside my ears, and I was constantly shaking it out from my belongings. Our drivers regaled us with stories of how the dust could ruin the engines of their cars. After the group's first night of camping in the Aral Sea zone, drama struck as a dust storm blew away their tents. As the storm continued to howl and darkened

the sky, the group was forced to cancel several planned activities and flee to a safer place, a group of stone yurts on the shores of Lake Qamystybas several hours away. We heard later that this storm was actually a minor one by the standards of the region; locals told us about gales that endured for days. But respondents told us that they usually tried to shrug them off. They donned a cloth mask and continued about their business.

## all these features of the trip were lessons about the constant obstacles that Aral Sea residents face

All these features of the trip were lessons about the constant obstacles that Aral Sea residents face. In a meeting with an NGO official, we heard that some outlying villages still did not have basic services like running water or access to a kindergarten. The challenges that we faced in simply getting to this region illustrate its peripheralization, or the way the Priaral'e, a vast rural area at the meeting point of three states, continues to be viewed as marginal by leaders in these countries' capitals. In one particularly compelling question, a student asked that same NGO official if they were taking on roles, such as supplying ambulances to local residents, that should really be done by the state. The official nodded her head in agreement. Later, the official declared to me with some outrage: "What century are we living in?!" I got her point; many people in the region seemed to have been left behind. The absence of the state was an ever-present theme in the summer

school. I'm not sure I would have been able to sense that from a classroom, but I could feel it deeply by being physically in the region.

## the challenges that we faced in simply getting to this region illustrate its peripheralization

The region's climate was yet another crucial in-person experience. After spending several days camping (and sneezing) in the former seabed, it wasn't hard to believe residents' claims that the Aral Sea disaster had negatively affected their health. But it did make the existing balance of research—most scientific studies have concentrated on the environmental, rather than the medical effects of the disaster—all the more difficult to understand. Why on earth have we not paid more attention? I asked myself this question again and again. I also came away with an appreciation for the striking beauty of the region. The sunsets were fiery, unearthly, like nothing I have ever experienced. When we visited in August, tamarisk plants were flowering; the former seabed was dotted with shocking bursts of purple. There was a kind of elusive,



14 *Camels Outside the City of Aral'sk*

unknowable quality about the place; it really got under your skin. It didn't seem a coincidence that the region's nature preserve, Barsa-Kelmes (literally, "The Place of No Return"), had earned a reputation as a [place of mystery and paranormal phenomena](#).

Western representations of the disaster tend to stress a narrative of societal collapse. The most pervasive image of the Aral Sea, for instance, is that of ships abandoned on the dried-up seabed. But we found a far more complex portrait. The benefit of the summer school was that it gave us time to talk to people. Our first day in Aral'sk was devoted to meetings with local experts working to mitigate the effects of the disaster, including hydrologists, zoologists, agroforestry experts, and engineers. As part of an exercise, a DKU faculty mentor introduced the students to the concept of the Anthropocene, or the idea that human impact on the planet has become so profound that it constitutes an entirely new geological epoch. The students listened carefully. The local experts, however, had some questions. Dramatic environmental change wasn't something really "new" for them, they said. The sea had retreated and returned many times over the course of its existence. The people of the region, they noted, had continued surviving, working, and going on.

Aral Sea residents have plenty of experience with survival. Their knowledge is one that we might draw upon, as shrinking lakes and seas affect other areas of the globe.

This comment, much like the frightening dust storm that was apparently really not so frightening by the standards of the region, made me think. The environs of the Aral Sea, like other drylands, has ecological dynamics that are not at equilibrium. Well before the modern retreat of the sea began in the 1960s, for instance, Russian imperial geographers complained that they could not even produce accurate maps of the sea and its surroundings. The sea is a constantly changing place that has always been one step ahead of human attempts to pin it down. What I might see

as a surprise, last-minute change of plans, like the students' hurried flight from the dust storm, was in some sense routine.

Empire was also crucial to the story. Due to Russian imperial and Soviet efforts to develop Central Asia's cotton industry, Aral Sea residents came to face environmental calamities earlier and in different ways than other parts of the globe. As cotton production accelerated in the 1960s, the sea began to retreat. The environmental extremes that had always been a part of their way of life became much more pronounced. These local experts were right that Aral Sea residents have plenty of experience with survival. Their knowledge is one that we might draw upon, as shrinking lakes and seas affect other areas of the globe.

Efforts to address the disaster were also a foremost theme in the course. We visited the dam built with World Bank funds and a local fish hatchery. Both had helped support the partial return of the region's fishing industry.



*Sarah Cameron's Saksaul Tree*

Afforestation, or the planting of trees to ameliorate the region's climate, is another major direction of assistance to the region. Such efforts first began under Soviet rule. In more recent years, the Japanese government, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have



*Tamarisk Plants on the Shores of Lake Qamystybas*

all developed *saxsaul* plots. The *saxsaul* is a highly drought resistant plant, and it can hold several tons of sand in place. But figuring out how to get *saxsaul* to grow in the former seabed isn't easy. Some plantings have had a high failure rate, and finding sufficient water for them is a huge challenge. It can also take years for the trees to mature, a prospect that frustrates some Aral Sea residents eager for more immediate assistance.

USAID refers to its ongoing work to plant trees as an effort to [“restore” the Aral Sea’s ecosystem](#). But the idea of “restoration” raises many questions. First, given that the Aral Sea has always been a place of change, a body of water easily altered by human influence, what is the baseline for “restoring” the sea? And who should get a say in that choice? Our trip revealed that the answers to these questions are complex.

We visited the village of Aralkum on a biting cold and windy day. There, UNDP had supported the planting of a *saxsaul* and *zhuzgun* barrier to protect the settlement from being buried in sand. As we toured the site, we saw a group of camels jog past us. We chased them happily, eager for a nice photo and the opportunity to warm up. But as we toured the site, we learned that the camels had begun to eat away at the trees. There was a fence around the tree barrier to prevent hungry animals from accessing the site. Over time, however, sand dunes had begun to pile up around the outside of the fence. Camels could now walk up over the sand and strip the trees.

The barrier had become less effective at protecting the village, but no one had taken the time to dig the fence out. I wondered why. Were villagers simply faced with much

more immediate concerns, like earning enough money to feed their families? Or was the tradeoff about sacrificing the trees to provide food for the camels? With the sea's retreat, some have turned to farming camels on the dried-up seabed. Their milk and wool are popular with Central Asian consumers, and camel breeding has provided a source of income for some who used to fish. Perhaps there were also other explanations. But at the very least, the challenges of maintaining the fence illustrated that there were clear differences of opinion on how to proceed with "restoring" the sea and its environs.



*Sarah Cameron and Summer School Participants at the Village of Aralkum.*

Our last night out in the stone yurts on the shores of Lake Qamystybas was a highlight of the trip. First, I jumped into the lake, and, after several dusty sweaty days, emerged from the water alive and refreshed. During the Soviet era, prior to the 1960s retreat, the Priaral'e had been popular as a place of relaxation and rest. I could understand why—and why some now see ecotourism and the construction of sanatoriums as one of the best ways to provide employment for people in the region. There was a limited tourist base not far from us elsewhere on the lake. Second, the students presented their final projects: actionable low-cost plans for cutting through the thicket of problems that people in the region faced. We talked about their proposals, which included developing short, educational videos about the sea and providing free, online medical and veterinary assistance for the people of the region.

Throughout the trip, I was constantly amazed by the students. They were bright, eager, and engaged. They invariably picked up on some important points that had

escaped my attention during the interviews that we conducted with local residents. They were also particularly gifted at storytelling, able to present the region and its challenges in an accessible way to a broader audience. Throughout the trip, I saw them on their phones, posting gorgeous photos to Instagram or developing humorous TikToks about what they had seen and learned. Since I've returned from summer travels, I've been asked by friends back home if it was "sad" or "depressing" to visit the Aral Sea region. Quite the contrary, I replied. I left with a feeling of hope.

*The author would like to thank the summer school organizers and faculty mentors, Helen Koch, Larissa Kogutenko, Olga Romanova, Zhanar Raimbekova, and Mariya Zadneprovskaya, for their invaluable assistance with this trip. It was an honor to be part of such a terrific group.*



*The Village of Aralkum and the Tree Barrier.*



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*Soviet Kazakhstan* (Cornell University Press, 2018).



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Three String Books is an imprint of Slavica Publishers devoted to translations of literary works and belles-lettres from Central and Eastern Europe, including Russia and the other successor states of the former Soviet Union.

**Maria A. Shelyakhovskaya. *Being Grounded in Love: The History of One Russian Family, 1872–1981*, trans. Christina E. Petrides and Maria A. Shelyakhovskaya**, xlvi + 450 p. (ISBN 978-089357-517-5), \$44.95.

Leo Tolstoy claimed that all happy families resemble one another; many in the West believe that all Russians are equally miserable. Maria (Gruzdeva) Shelyakhovskaya's *Being Grounded in Love: A History of One Russian Family, 1872–1981* challenges both such simplistic notions. *Being Grounded in Love* "is a conscious effort to look at and grasp the meaning of the tumultuous one hundred years of Russian and Soviet history (1872–1981)

by taking an ordinary family perspective as a vantage point and reconstructing it based on the materials

of a well-preserved family archive. The result is a deeply entertaining and engaging collage of personal recollections, authentic voices, intimate details, through which events of great magnitude—including multiple revolutions and wars—get illuminated in a distinctly personalized way. For sure, the ultimate result is partisan and partial, imbued with the partiality of love to one's own kin, the Gudzyuk-Gruzdev family. It is difficult to resist the feeling of compassion while reading entries of the personal diaries, the intimate correspondence of family members or listening to the collector's own voice recounting the family's itinerary through the century of troubles. Ultimately, by foregrounding love as a key motive, the book provides a story about the perseverance of human love and about the persistence of family ties as opposed to the heaviness of History."

—From the introduction by Vladimir Ryzhkovski



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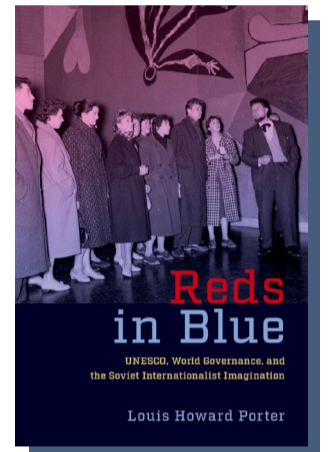
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Supported by a Spring 2022 First Book Subvention, Louis Howard Porter recently published [\*Reds in Blue: UNESCO, World Governance, and the Soviet Internationalist Imagination\*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2023).

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# A True Decolonization of Studying Ukraine in Political Science: From Theory Testing to Theory Building

by Inna Melnykovska

The study of Ukraine in political science has usually been done through the lens of existing regime theories and has mainly been limited to testing these theories. Alloying democratic rules with illiberal practices, Ukraine's political regime departed from classical theories of democracy and autocracy. Still, Ukraine benefited from the rise of a theoretical focus on hybrid regimes, which were the most widespread political regimes in the world at the beginning of the 21st century. Ukraine was long considered a typical case illustrative of the central features of defective democracies. While [Lucan Way, in "Pluralism by Default,"](#) argued that political pluralism emerged in Ukraine due to the weak capacities of the ruling presidents rather than of the democratic strength of civil society and liberal elites, he still categorized Ukraine as among the most democratic countries in the post-Soviet area. In [my own work on Europeanization](#), I also categorized Ukraine's as a 'most-likely' case of EU-driven democratic and market reforms being relatively effective due to broad pro-EU aspirations in Ukrainian society even in the absence of a credible EU membership path. But there was a problem in Ukraine's being a typical case of a hybrid regime, as its regime was everything but static.

the dynamic nature of  
Ukraine's regime...make[s]  
Ukraine a poor fit for  
testing both democratic  
and autocratic theoretical  
paradigms

Since its independence, Ukraine's regime dynamics have been highly turbulent, with ups and downs in its movement either toward democracy or toward autocracy. Its political processes have been characterized by elite conflicts, accompanied by mass protests of economic, nationalist,



and political natures and ranging from local to national scope. Despite initially showing symptoms of communist path-dependent inertia and a stalemate in political and economic liberalization, three critical junctures opened a window of opportunity for regime change: the moment of independence in 1991, the Orange Revolution in 2004, and the Euromaidan in 2013-2014. These critical junctures resulted not only in leadership replacement, but also targeted the institutional foundations of Ukraine's political regime. The first two initially brought democratization and directed the study of Ukraine toward the theoretical paradigms of democratic transition and democratization studies. Each time, a reverse trend towards autocracy followed soon after, however. In ["The House that Yanukovich Built,"](#) Serhiy Kudelia traces the efforts of President Viktor Yanukovich to restore and consolidate autocratic rule in Ukraine, which also resulted in scholars incorporating Ukraine's case into authoritarian paradigm and applying the theoretical approaches of modern competitive autocracies to Ukraine's case.

The dynamic nature of Ukraine's regime and the related challenge of what type of a political regime to allocate Ukraine to, make Ukraine a poor fit for testing both democratic and autocratic theoretical paradigms. Driven by the urgency of general theoretical models, mainstream

political scientists (so called ‘Westsplainers’) treated knowledge of regional, domestic, and local context as redundant in understanding the presumably universal workings of political systems, economies, and societies. As an outlier case, Ukraine’s scientific value was restricted to explaining particular empirical developments that were not observed in other countries. Thus, its potential—either as a single case or in comparison with other cases—to enrich the general theoretical knowledge was considered negligible. Ukraine’s case was “too specific” and “less generalizable” (read: less valuable) and thus could be left out of the analysis. “If a case does not fit [to a theory], so worse for the case,” as Ukrainian political scientist Kateryna Zarembo sums up in [her Ukrainska Pravda op ed.](#)

local forces were  
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conditions’

Scholars’ frequent disregard of Ukraine’s agency in political discussions and IR research has had even more harmful consequences than the dynamic nature of Ukraine’s political regime. IR studies on international socialization have mainly concentrated on the transformative powers of powerful external actors (e.g., the European Union, NATO) and their effectiveness in democratization processes in Ukraine, while local forces were ascribed no causal power and presented as ‘contextual conditions’. Referring to historical ties with Russia, former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger wrote in [a Washington Post op-ed](#) that Ukraine should be treated as “an integral part of Russian history and, indeed, of Russia. According to this account, Ukraine was too similar to Russia or not even a case at all.

In contrast to traditional Ukrainian Studies, which tended to highlight the specifics of Ukraine’s language, culture, and history, Ukraine experts in political science persisted in their focus on theory testing and sought to justify the country’s ‘typicalness’ and its comparability with other countries across the world. The topic of the Orange Revolution offered a particular focus for comparative studies beyond the spatial limitations of Eastern Europe and post-Soviet Eurasia, as [exemplified by Anastasiia Kudlenko](#), who highlighted similar roles that civil societies

played in Ukraine, Georgia, Tunisia, and Egypt. Combined with methodological excellence, country expertise was understood as a guarantor of the rigorous research quality in producing more detailed testing of political, economic, and social (ir)regularities.

in its resilience to Russia’s  
invasion, Ukraine now  
has a chance to switch  
from being a case for  
theory testing to a case  
for theory building

In its resilience to Russia’s invasion, Ukraine now has a chance to switch from being a case for theory testing to a case for theory building – an approach which, I argue, would enhance Ukraine’s agency in political science and mark a true decolonization of Ukrainian Studies in that field. Such a decolonization approach would not be limited to the competition for (more) focus among different areas within Regional Studies and would move Ukraine from the periphery to (closer to) the core of political science debates.

What theory to build? How to proceed in building a theory? The empirical puzzle of Ukraine’s resilience against Russia’s invasion could be a good starting point. We have seen the remarkable (self-)coordinated and collaborative efforts of NGOs, volunteer initiatives, businesses, and authorities at national and local levels in securing and recovering the Ukrainian state. Ukraine’s resilience also involves the broad public support and action of Ukrainian society. According to the [MOBILISE project](#), led by Olga Onuch, who recently gained the first ever official professorial title containing the phrase “Ukrainian Politics” in the English-speaking world, 80% of the civilian population of Ukraine are engaged in the war effort in some way: either by donating, volunteering, or direct action of a variety of types.

According to democratic and autocratic paradigms, this should not have happened: Ukraine’s political and state institutions should have been too weak to counter Russia’s aggression; civil society and elites would have been too fragmented to unite in collective action; business elites would have been too narrowly interested and selfish; and the population would have remained divided, passive, or even welcoming of the invader in regions traditionally

seen as pro-Russian. Both theories were wrong. Ukraine remains resilient in a ‘despite all’ manner and its resilience is of a civic nature. This promises to provide an original contribution to contemporary political science debates on democratic resilience.

Resilience was long considered a popular term but an empty theoretical concept. It has been applied in reference to different crises, including economic and financial recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. Recently, the term resilience has entered the realm of politics, albeit mainly in reference to the persistence of democratic institutions or democratic regimes such that it connotes a capacity to remain stable and withstand change. The scholarly focus has remained on elites and their capacities to tackle particular crises by means of their decision-making powers. While scholars have made important contributions to our understanding of democratic resilience, they have retained their focus on democratic (mainly advanced) systems, political institutions, and elites as both agents and beneficiaries of resilience. Recent work considers the resilience of civil society in resistance to the (illiberal) state and overlooks the contribution of a broad range of civil actors, often through productive interaction with the state, to democratic governance. In contrast to prevailing theorizations, Ukraine’s civic resilience involves a variety

of interactions: civic resilience apart from the state; civic resilience against the state; civic resilience in support of the state; civic resilience in dialogue with the state; civic resilience in partnership with the state; and civic resilience beyond the state in transnational and global settings.

The important role of civic resilience by community and for community has been highlighted in the recent discussions of [bottom-up Europeanization](#), the [localization of global governance](#), and, more recently, in case studies on [Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia](#). Elena Korosteleva argues that resilience is home-grown and relational, as it develops bottom-up and horizontally through interaction of state and non-state actors. Civic resilience is not limited to self-organization of society but results in (the improvement of) democratic collaborative governance. Moreover, democratic resilience on the citizen level has proved to be much more dynamic, collaborative, and transformative for the actors participating in resilience efforts themselves.

Political science still needs to know more about the forms and types of civic resilience, the practices and mechanisms of learning and collaboration between different actors—local state, entrepreneurs, civil society, and volunteer initiatives – and the sources and effects of civic resilience. In her recent article, [“Revolution and Resilience: Ukraine’s Civil Society and the End of Post-Sovietism,”](#)

Susann Worschech suggests a new research agenda: studying Ukraine via narratives of resilience, the framing of threats and of withstanding, social scripts of resilience behavior, and the ability of a society to transform either in reaction to or in anticipation of a disturbance. Addressing these aspects will help us to understand the role of civic resilience for social and eventually political change and for democratic institutions.

Ukraine’s case provides not only a better understanding of the empirical reality in the country, but also an enriched conceptual understanding of civic

resilience and a theoretical foundation for a measurement methodology that could be applied to and tested in



22 NGOs such as the LGBTQI+-centered human rights organization Insight have made substantial efforts to secure and recover the Ukrainian state and to support Ukrainian society. Photos by Olena Shevchenko.

comparative cross-case analyses. The knowledge of sites and practices of civic resilience (local participative governance, active citizens and civil society organizations, culture initiatives and community centers, business civic activism and business creative hubs, among others) that Ukraine's case promises will help us understand how to preserve and shield democracy from populism, nationalism, and radicalization in advanced democracies as well. Hence, explaining the puzzle of Ukraine's civic resilience has the potential to generate a new theory of civic and collaborative resilience, which would be relevant for scholarship on democratizing regimes and advanced democracies alike.

## Ukraine's case...will help us understand how to preserve and shield democracy from populism, nationalism, and radicalization in advanced democracies as well

Building a theory of civic resilience relies on solid data collection. Conceptual and theoretical innovation should be underpinned by original data collected and generated in Ukraine. Russia's war brought methodological challenges, made some topics (e.g., corruption) politically sensitive, and introduced new ethical considerations, but it did not eliminate the ways we can study and collect data on Ukraine. Digital ethnography, remote observations, and online interviewing, among other qualitative and quantitative methods that are booming in political science since the COVID-19 pandemic, are among the many ways scholars can collect data in the war-torn research field. Initiatives to create repositories of Ukraine-related data (e.g., Discuss Data, <https://discuss-data.net/>; the digital archives of the Center for Urban History Lviv, <https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/digital-projects-en/>) will not only aid the efforts of data collection and generation, but will also enable and sustain interest in Ukraine in academic communities across the world. Ukraine-related data depositories could serve as incubators of methodologically rigorous and theory-building research on Ukraine.

Once a new theory on Ukraine's civic resilience is

elaborated, it will need to be applied to other country cases across the world in order to demonstrate its relevance beyond Ukraine's case. As [Abel Polese argues](#), Ukraine experts should not forget, or ignore, that similar things have been done in other regions of the world. Eventually, and living up to the comparative nature of political science, Ukraine will be in search of a new family of cases to be compared with. The post-Soviet umbrella is no longer appropriate. While the value of contrast is still there, the post-Soviet countries exemplify different directions of political, economic, and social developments. As Vladimir Gel'man describes it in [his article](#), the post-Soviet regimes moved "out of the frying pan" and demonstrated a great diversity of regime transformations. The similarities among them have been diminishing from year to year and are now far in the past.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine opens many opportunities for social scientists with Ukraine expertise to meaningfully integrate into the discipline's search for new theoretical paradigms, jump on the bandwagon of contemporary methodological trends, overcome divisions with traditional Ukrainian studies, and generate new collaborative interdisciplinary and cross-/trans-regional research. Ukrainian refugee academics currently hosted by Western universities might extend their academic networks and initiate new research collaborations with traditional 'Ukrainists', as well as with researchers from different (sub-) disciplines and with varying regional expertise. In this way, they could pioneer a true 'decolonization' of studying Ukraine in political science, departing from the previous theoretical paradigms and the restraint of the universal knowledge.



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going consequences. They will delve into the North and South Caucasus in the Soviet and post-Soviet cultural space. They will also look carefully at the roles played by Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and China in the region, including in the Black Sea region; and they will assess the impact of the precedent of Nagorno-Karabakh on the traumatized relations between Armenia and its Turkic neighbors and the shifting direction of current Armenian alliances.

Applications will be accepted until **February 1, 2024**.

Questions? Contact Professor Anna Vassilieva: [avassili@middlebury.edu](mailto:avassili@middlebury.edu) and Willem de Mol van Otterloo: [wdemolvannotterloo@middlebury.edu](mailto:wdemolvannotterloo@middlebury.edu).

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# THE 2023 ASEEEES BOOK PRIZE WINNERS

## on research, writing, and publishing



**Alexander Martin**

*From the Holy Roman Empire to the Land of the Tsars: One Family's Odyssey, 1768-1870*

Reginald Zelnik  
Book Prize in  
History Winner



**Jasmina Tumbas**

*"I am Jugoslovenka!": Feminist Performance Politics During and After Yugoslav Socialism*

Barbara Jelavich  
Book Prize Winner



**Togzhan Kassenova**

*Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb*

Marshall  
Shulman Book  
Prize Winner



**Tomila Lankina**

*The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia: From Imperial Bourgeoisie to Post-Communist Middle Class*

Davis Center Book  
Prize in Political  
and Social Studies  
Winner

**Tell us about the process of writing this book! How did you determine your subjects, case studies, and/or methods? What kind(s) of research did it entail?**

**AM:** [*From the Holy Roman Empire to the Land of the Tsars*] started with a serendipitous discovery. Russian archivists piqued my curiosity when they showed me an unknown German memoir about Napoleon's occupation of Moscow. Unfortunately, the author was unknown. Then, in another archive, I randomly came across a document that was clearly by the same person and included a signature: Johannes Ambrosius Rosenstrauch. Now that I had a name, I started looking for traces of him. The digitization of books and journals was just then getting under way and his name was so unusual that it made for a great search term. I found him in many places online—he is even mentioned in the *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov* [collection of legal documents]—and in archives in Russia, Germany, and Holland. He lived from 1768 to 1835. He was an important Freemason and a Catholic

who converted to Lutheranism. He was a barber-surgeon and actor in Germany and Holland, an actor and luxury-goods merchant in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and a pastor in Odessa and Kharkiv. He participated in the German Enlightenment, the Westernization of Russia, the colonization of Ukraine, and the Napoleonic Wars. His son was a leading Moscow merchant until a financial scandal ruined him in the 1860s. Rosenstrauch's story encapsulated an entire era of Russian and European history.

**TL:** [*The Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia*] is a product of many years of intellectual gestation. Since my very first Ph.D.-level project in the late 1990s, I have been interested in Russian regions, not least because I know that sub-national politics matter for understanding political outcomes at the national level...Like other scholars of post-communist Russia, I began by looking for explanations of sub-national variations in the present or the recent political past, but I realised that present-day politics, elite struggles, or institutional choices, and even communist-era legacies, are an imperfect guide to understanding why some regions are more open, more

autocratic, more tolerant, more protesting, or more civic than others. Yet, though intuitively I felt that *history matters*, I stumbled in the dark until I came across a modest volume in the Bodleian Library of Oxford where I was doing my DPhil: the 1897 census, *Obschchiy svod* (general compilation) proclaimed the title. Like the naïve tourist who chances upon a market curio in a distant land, I cautiously perused it, not knowing what place it would find back home on the mantelpiece of my academic research. The *svod* had generic tables from the First Russian Imperial Census. There were the usual data on literacy, on ethnicity and on religion—all from before the Revolution. There was one item, though, that intrigued me. It read “*sosloviya*.” The *svod* had detailed statistics on nobles, clergy, and other such categories. The *sosloviya* promised no immediate payoffs by way of the theoretical debates or lines of inquiry fashionable around the time I was doing my PhD level work and in the early years of my post-doctoral level research. It seemed like an artefact from a long gone and irrelevant past. After all, the paradigms that many of my generation of scholars were working with were all about the *transition from communism*. While it became clear by the early 2000s that it was not necessarily democracy that was the destination to which Russia headed, few questioned that the starting point was *communism*. It was a transition from communism into some increasingly murky outcome that scholars were scrambling to capture with a succession of unsatisfactory labels.

The *sosloviya*, a relic of the bygone times, had no place in the then fashionable intellectual paradigmatic frameworks. It had no easy hinge, no theoretical frame of reference, and no straightforward fit with *communism* from which Russia was transitioning into an increasingly grim future. But browsing through the data I could see that some *sosloviya* appeared to have higher literacy levels. And some regions had a higher percentage share of the various estates than did others. At least at the level of basic indices of modernity the *sosloviya* seemed to matter.

The moment I held the *obschchiy svod* in my hands at the Bodleian Library at Oxford was the beginning of the intellectual journey that eventually resulted in [*Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia*]. One of the most intriguing estates of the *sosloviya* was the *meshchane*.



Photos: One of the highlights of [Tomila Lankina's] research was visiting [her] father's ancestral village in Samara region called Tyagloye Ozero (Lake Tyagloye): “Visiting the village and seeing the many old timers whose families have lived there for generations—including people with the last name of Lankin—corroborated how the Soviet project did not entirely obliterate old social values, communities, ties, and bonds to a place.”

Growing up in the Soviet Union, I internalised the derision towards this estate. As Vera Dunham masterfully conveys in her book [In Stalin's Time](#), the *meshchane* and *meshchanstvo* are in Russian society associated with bad taste, with kitsch, with petty bourgeois morality and a striving for personal enrichment. Yet, when I first ran simple regressions to see if there was a link between the social divides of tsarist Russia and democratic variations in Russia's regions, the *meshchane* estate kept emerging as significantly and positively associated with a variety of measures of post-communist development, openness, and democracy. Eventually, to make sense of the historical patterns and their long-term implications, I teamed up with Professor Alexander Libman from the Free University in Berlin. Alexander had also worked very intensively on Russian regional politics and political economy, and I was lucky to have such an outstanding intellectual collaborator. We gathered more data for a variety of control variables like religion, Soviet period industrialization, tsarist industrialization, and so forth, and began to systematically analyse the significance of the Tsarist estate system for post-communist political outcomes in Russian regions. Our findings, which we published [in a paper in the American Political Science Review](#), gave me greater confidence in making the claims in the book. Now I had dozens of data tables to make the

case, in addition to the many other materials I used in my book to unpack the causal mechanisms. The *sosloviya* matter. And we ought to regard the *meshchane*, along with the other “educated” estates of nobles, clergy, and merchants, as pivotal in the story of the genesis of not just the tsarist Russian, but the Soviet middle class.

**JT:** [“*I am Jugoslovenka!*”] entailed archival research, interviews, and studio visits with artists, and lots of time thinking about feminism, art, music, and visual culture. The question of women’s empowerment in socialist Yugoslavia has been a central protagonist in my life for a long time. As a child of the Yugoslav nation, I spent most of my life in the diaspora as an immigrant, the first years being marked by a deep longing to return. The desperate fantasy of a return to a united Yugoslavia dwindled by the early 2000s as the disintegration had taken full effect, but I still wanted to understand how and why Yugoslavia was so special.

“I spent most of my life in the diaspora as an immigrant, the first years being marked by a deep longing to return.”

My academic training allowed me to write a book that illuminated my early experiences in the country and the feminist performance politics I saw expressed in art and culture throughout my adult life as an art historian and researcher. I began to wonder what we might learn from a visual history of women’s emancipation in Yugoslavia and how that emphasis might provide an essential narrative about a nation that has since perished, but which remains the foundation for the work of feminist artists, theorists, and historians from the region. The most challenging aspect was to bridge numerous decades of this difficult story of socialist Yugoslavia and its disintegration in the 1990s, while ensuring I highlight what that history could teach us about both the generative but also adverse parts of that political system, such as the persistence of gender-based violence and patriarchal values. Most importantly, I wrote this book to elucidate how and why *Jugoslovenka*, as a figure, might still be relevant today.

## Did your approach or argument evolve as you wrote this book? How did your ideas, claims, or perspective on your subject change over time?

**AM:** It took time before I figured out how to write Rosenstrauch’s story. It didn’t seem right for a biography: a biography is about how the unique life of one person affected the course of history, but Rosenstrauch was a fairly minor historical figure and the evidence of his life had too many gaps. On the other hand, he was perfect for a microhistory along the lines of Willard Sunderland’s *The Baron’s Cloak*. Microhistory looks for aspects of a person that are typical of an era and it foregrounds the historian’s role as a detective. This approach let me use Rosenstrauch’s story to paint a broad panorama of pre-modern German and Russian life from an “everyman” point of view. It also gave me a way to talk about the gaps in the evidence. For example, it was his theater career that first brought him to Russia, but he never spoke of this later on because acting was considered an immoral profession. Microhistory offered a solution: I could write explicitly about the source problem, and then, because my focus was on Rosenstrauch as a typical figure of his time, make informed conjectures about him based on the memoirs of other actors.

**TK:** Fifteen years ago, when I started thinking about telling my country’s nuclear story, I approached it as a freshly minted Ph.D. My focus was solely on decision-making—why did the Kazakh government choose a non-nuclear path? Only a handful of countries dealt with nuclear weapons, and Kazakhstan’s case was missing from the academic discourse. I planned to use theoretical models of why countries say Yes or No nuclear weapons and test Kazakhstan’s case against them. It’d probably still be a useful book, but I think it would be a much more boring one [than *Atomic Steppe*].

“It felt like breaking free from my academic straitjacket.”

Gradually, as I started working with the archives in Kazakhstan and traveling to the Semipalatinsk region, meeting local people near the former nuclear testing site, I understood that what happened before Kazakhstan became independent was no less, and maybe even more, important. I couldn't omit discussion of the Soviet nuclear tests. I wanted to tell the story of the Kazakh land, the people, and all the suffering they endured during the Soviet period. Above all, I wanted to put Kazakhstan's story into high resolution and show how nuclear weapons programs are not something abstract. In another turnaround, I decided to write a more accessible book, and it was hard to permit myself to write less formally. It felt like breaking free from my academic straitjacket.



*Togzhan Kassenova meeting a local elder in Kokentau (formerly known as Znamenka). Kokentau is located next to the former Soviet nuclear testing site.*

**TL:** While I embraced both working with archival materials and quantitative data analysis, I felt that my analysis also could benefit from an interpretive, historical-ethnographic sensibility. The biggest puzzle that I address in my book is how societies manage to reproduce social divides, social closure, social values, and exhibit other aspects of social resilience despite the horrific terror, dislocation, and repressions of the kind witnessed in Stalinist USSR. The answer is in the role of family, neglected in much of the political science work which tends to focus on state policy and institutions. But dealing with the family factor involved constructing family genealogies, reading personal memoirs, and asking people about their ancestors and memories. I also found

that focusing on just one region—Samara—would help me tease out the nuances of social reproduction far better than if I were providing isolated examples from many different regions. I felt that combining an in-depth analysis of historical processes in one region with large-n analysis of data for all other regions worked well. I hope that my approach and new theory has something to contribute beyond Russia, to other studies of countries with a brutal legacy of social engineering where nonetheless the old social structures continue to shape political dynamics. There is a three-case comparison of Russia, China, and Hungary in the last chapter of the book. In it, I try to understand the political regime outcomes in the 1990s and 2000s depending on the social divides of the pre-communist past.

**JT:** I knew that I had grown up in a society where women like my mother and grandmother were emancipated workers who believed in the autonomy of women, and I knew that there was a lot of feminist art and powerful women whose work I had researched for years. So I began the project with an enthusiasm for women's emancipation in the history of socialist Yugoslavia. But the more feminists I read from the region, and the closer I looked at the art and cultural production, the more it became apparent that socialist Yugoslavia had its own history of misogyny. The challenge to illuminate the paradoxical history of women's and queer emancipation in socialist Yugoslavia was thrilling because it allowed for contrasting ideas to co-exist and account for the rich history of the region that shaped my own views and priorities.

### **What challenges did you encounter in writing this book? Is there particular advice you would give to first-time authors?**

**AM:** I wanted to write a book that was broad in scope, theoretically grounded, and interesting both to scholars and to undergraduates and general readers. This created two challenges. One was the sheer variety of new subjects I had to learn about (e.g. how did one become an actor in the Holy Roman Empire, start a Masonic lodge in Moscow, or become a clergyman in Odessa?).

The other challenge involved how to write the book. To help me understand both Rosenstrauch's actions and his interiority, I wanted to use a range of interpretive frameworks, such as empire, mobilities, memory studies, transnational entanglements, religious conversion, and masculinities. But I also wanted to maintain a focus on him as a flesh-and-blood human being, so I tried to keep explicit theorizing to a minimum. It wasn't always an easy balance to strike.

For first-time authors—I think my project shows that much research can be done with digitized primary sources. At a time when access to Russian archives is limited, these can provide a rich alternative source base for scholarly research.



*Togzhan Kassenova at the launch of the Kazakh edition of Atomic Steppe in Almaty, Kazakhstan in October 2022.*

**TK:** A fundamental challenge I faced was a conflict between the scholar and the Kazakh in me. I wrote about the distressing history of my native country. The pain inflicted by the Soviet nuclear tests on the people I identify with, the injustice of it all, and the anger I felt were often hard to keep in check. But it was important for me to stay as intellectually honest and academically rigorous as possible. The hardest part was meeting the victims of Soviet nuclear tests. I felt tremendous responsibility for telling their stories. Nothing could prepare me to meet children with visible disabilities who represent the fourth and the fifth generation of victims. I also faced challenges with access to archival materials, especially in Russia. Many materials are still classified. Another limitation I had to keep in mind was that memory tricks us all, and that when people speak about the past, they might engage in some inadvertent

mythmaking. When I interviewed participants of the political processes, I made sure I double- or triple-checked that data against other sources whenever possible.

I would encourage first-time authors who encounter similar challenges: do not shy away from the limitations of your research process; admit them to yourself and the reader but carry on and do it with respect for the people whose stories you are telling.

**TL:** If I were to give advice to first-time authors, it would be to be audacious in breaking out of the established paradigms and ways of thinking. I would also advise breaking out of the confines of the modes of thought and paradigms and templates of your own discipline. It is, of course, easier said than done. For this author, it took many years of intellectual gestation and a Full Professorship to feel confident enough to take on some big names in several disciplines—history, political science, economics, and sociology. Try to look where no one else is looking. And when it comes to methods, be audacious and be eclectic. Embrace the many possibilities that currently exist to shed light on a problem using anything from surveys to social network analysis to in-depth and immersive ethnography.

**“Be audacious in breaking out of the established paradigms and ways of thinking... Try to look where no one else is looking.”**

**JT:** The biggest challenge was turning away from the research and beginning to articulate an analysis and argument of my own. It is so much more fun to gather research and conduct interviews than to actually sit down and start making sense of everything in writing. To facilitate the mental space for this, I had one simple rule: I turned off my router whenever I was writing the book. For me, this meant that in the first 4-5 hours of the morning, I would be offline and unavailable to answer emails or handle any other inquiries of that nature. I also frequently read other writers before starting to

write. It allowed the process of writing to feel more like a conversation I was having with other scholars and readers, not just with myself. Most importantly, I had different people read drafts at various stages, which inspired me to keep writing and focus on the clarity of my argument. One of the critical and most rewarding moments in my writing happened when I was preparing the entire manuscript to hand in for final peer-review: I asked someone with no background in the arts, feminism, or Yugoslav history to read the book. This reader had many questions I had not anticipated, which provoked a constructive return to the entire manuscript from a new perspective, working through different sections to make sure that people outside the field of art, feminism, and East European history could understand my analysis.



*Jasmina Tumbas with Tanja Ostojić and Selma Selman, both artists in *I am Jugoslovenka!*, and scholar Bojana Videkanić in 2017. "We all got together, and Ana Grujić - a person who read my manuscript multiple times, was also present." Photo by Ana Grujić.*



*Jasmina Tumbas, with scholar and artist Bojana Videkanić, at the 2019 ASEEES Summer Convention in Zagreb. Photo by Sanja Horvatinčić.*

## What unexpected stories or information did you uncover while working on this book? What might readers be surprised to find within its pages?

**AM:** I hope my book inspires readers to think about the nature of history itself. Two of the book's major themes are how macro- and micro-level factors interact and how a person's experience can reverberate across time and space. When Rosenstrauch decided in 1820 to become a pastor in Odessa, he did so because the ongoing revolutions in Europe had triggered a crisis within Russian Freemasonry, but also because he personally had just suffered a near-fatal illness. The memory of Rosenstrauch's social marginality as an actor in 18th century Germany motivated his son to embrace bourgeois respectability in 19th century Moscow. A copy of his memoir of 1812 was smuggled to Germany by a descendant in the 20th century and is now a treasured family heirloom in 21st century Mississippi, while in 21st century Moscow, portraits of his son and daughter-in-law decorate another descendant's apartment. In our academic and popular discourse about history, we tend to focus, often quite judgmentally, on states, ethnicities, and other big aggregates that operated across long stretches of time. Our understanding will be deeper, and perhaps more sympathetic, if we realize that these aggregates were composed of human beings similar to ourselves, all with their own individual memories of the past, ideas about the present, and expectations for the future.



*Rosenstrauch's great-great-great-great-grandson Sergei Shtraus in Moscow with portraits of Rosenstrauch's son and daughter-in-law (his ancestors).*

**TK:** I hope the readers will be as enthralled by the characters of my book as I was. Meeting people—locals in the villages near the former nuclear testing site in Semipalatinsk, former policymakers, diplomats, and nuclear scientists—was the most meaningful part of working on this book. Their stories, personal experiences, and the fact they shared them with me were the best of it all. On a personal level, I drew a lot of inspiration from those encounters—be it the survivors of nuclear tests who persevere or people involved in nuclear risk reduction work who dedicate their lives to making the world safer (in a literal sense of this word!). I was surprised and inspired by all the human connections I observed between Kazakh, American, and Russian scientists and technical experts who worked together to secure nuclear material or dismantle nuclear weapons infrastructure in Kazakhstan. Especially nowadays, when so much around us seems to be falling apart, it's an important reminder of the power of human connections.

**“I was surprised and inspired by all the human connections I observed.”**

**TL:** The statistically inclined reader will find large-n data analysis of hundreds of districts that cover the entire territory of Russia. The historian will find new archival sources and a fresh take on Tsarist and Soviet history. The ethnographer will hopefully enjoy the interpretive delve into how ordinary families make sense of the past to navigate their way in the society and politics of the present. My most important contribution to both the scholarship on Russia and comparative studies in historical sociology and political economy, I feel, is to bring the *sosloviye* and the *meshchane* in particular, as an urban estate, to the attention of scholars as a relatively neglected legacy of pre-modernity with implications for social dynamics and political orientations.

**JT:** The body-centered characteristics of resistance are varied and sometimes even contradictory, which makes Yugoslavia such a fascinating case study: anti-fascist feminists intersect with the emancipatory power of beauty contestants, fierce anti-war activists, avant-garde performance artists, pop music icons, queer revolutionaries, and war-time snipers. I think people are most surprised by some of the protagonists I have included, such as Lepa Brena, Marina Abramović, Ema Redžepova, and Vlasta Delimar, alongside recognized feminist artists like Sanja Iveković, or the feminist collective Women in Black. I wanted to find a way to account for contradictory stories of feminist and queer emancipation, which are an essential part of how emancipatory ideas circulate and find expression in culture. It is my hope that readers will not only understand how *Jugoslovenka* links the diverse manifestations, but that they will expand her reach by finding their own readings of feminist performance politics, beyond the book. My book is just the tip of the iceberg of the many different ways women and queers have resisted patriarchal socialism and nationalism.

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[Call for Proposals](#): Deadline January 26, 2024

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March 14-17, 2024 - Chapel Hill, NC

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### REECAS Northwest Conference

April 11-13, 2024 - Seattle, WA

[Call for Proposals](#): Deadline February 5, 2024

### North East Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Conference

April 6, 2024 - New York University, NY

[Call for Proposals](#): Deadline January 12, 2024

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