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Cover Photo: Image of a catalog in Moldova. Photo by Anna Whittington.
Teaching and Learning Soviet History through the Unessay

by Paula Michaels with Claire Dowling, Katherine Robertson, and Kelly Lin Huai Wong

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The unessay as an assessment tool has grown in popularity, particularly in tertiary history classes. Instructors empower students to choose their genre to produce a research-informed creative engagement with the past. Short stories, board games, video games, and children’s books are all common unessay format choices. Other possibilities include cooking blog posts, sewing projects, comedy skits, and “radio play” podcasts. The freedom to choose the form for presenting research and argumentation gives students the chance to draw on skills and passions that would not typically make their way into the history classroom.

In this article, we offer an experience report on the use of the unessay in an advanced undergraduate history class at a large public university in Melbourne, Australia, but the observations offered here have implications for other national and educational contexts. Michaels served as primary instructor, supported by a teaching assistant. She had intermittently used the unessay but, in 2021, she overhauled the course’s organization, assigned texts, and assessments to support student choice of the unessay option. Coauthors Claire Dowling, Katherine Robertson, and Kelly Lin Huai Wong were undergraduate students who chose the unessay. Dowling used PowerPoint to construct a choose-your-own-adventure (CYOA) game called “Surviving Stalinism.” Her objective was to demonstrate the mix of agency and luck that drove personal fate. Robertson composed a diary from a purported art student in the Khrushchev era (1953-64). She wrote the diary entries in a handmade book styled after a 1960s’ Soviet composition notebook, enhanced with marginalia inspired by Soviet artists. Wong composed an instrumental piece of music in the spirit of Dmitrii Shostakovich (1906-75). She used all aspects of the music—instrumentation, pace, tone—to tell the story of his effort to navigate a safe path of creative expression during the repressive years of the Stalin regime (1928-53).

To analyze our experience of the unessay as an assessment tool, we organize this article into six sections. The first section briefly lays out the pedagogical case for the unessay. The second section details the assessment’s implementation. The next three sections of the article offer reports from Dowling, Robertson, and Wong, respectively.
on the student experience of the unessay. Unlike other parts of this article, these three sections are written in the first person. The remaining sections are written in a collaborative voice (we) or, where appropriate, with reference to the subject by an individual author’s surname. We conclude with summary comments regarding our insights about the experience and recommendations for others seeking to implement the unessay as an assessment tool.

The pedagogical case for the unessay

Beyond mere mastery of historical content, the unessay offers a path to two significant learning outcomes: creativity and empathy. As Sheila McManus puts it, the unessay promotes “imaginative questions, intuitive connections, empathy, and the passion that drives many historians.” As a deeply active task, the unessay bridges cognitive and affective processes to promote “perspective taking” or “positionality.” Critical engagement with the past demands understanding it on its own terms, without projecting present-day knowledge and norms. Critical awareness of one’s own positionality, as well as that of historical subjects, is essential. As three Finnish educators wrote in their description of historical simulation for high schoolers, such creative activities “allow the student to step into a historical figure’s shoes and to fill in the missing blanks in a historical narrative with knowledge-based imagination.” Students who undertook the unessay report similar empathic experiences prompted by creative engagement with the past. As Robertson put it in our conversations while writing this article, the unessay prompted her to read “beyond just what’s written” in primary sources.

However, it is impossible to fill the gaps between sources imaginatively but plausibly without sufficient understanding of the motives, constraints, and worldview of past actors. Students who undertook the unessay drew on the context provided in the course content, supplemented substantially by their further primary and secondary research. In tutorials and consultations, Michaels underscored that the research component of the unessay was the lynchpin because, as with role play and simulations, it ideally framed and informed the entire imaginative process.

The unessay assignment

Titled Life in the Soviet Union, the course emphasized history from below, seeking to draw students’ eyes away from high politics and ideology to the lived experience of ordinary citizens. Texts included English-language translations of diary entries, memoir excerpts, letters, newspaper articles, anecdotes, and films, which were supported by a textbook and selected secondary readings.

In the first week of the twelve-week semester, students received detailed written information on all assessment tasks, including a “research project.” The document outlining that task specified that students had two options for the “medium of expression”: a conventional essay or an unessay, with the latter allowing:

for a creative/imaginative engagement with the past, while still staying grounded in an evidentiary source base. ... The creative submission is limited only by your imagination. It has one goal: to demonstrate engagement with a topic related to the social or cultural history of the USSR. It can take any form, including, but not limited to, the following: historical fiction short story; an imagined “private,” “primary source” (letter[s]; diary entry/ies); political poster; poem; song; graphic novel; comic strip; zine; children’s book; board game; painting; podcast interview with a fictional character or historical figure; craft project (a meal, felt boots [valenki], wooden toy, needlework).

Alongside the creative submission, students had to turn in a bibliography and an exegesis that explained the research question and how the creative work responded to it. Students were encouraged to search the internet for explanations and examples of unessays; sample work by students in previous years were also shared on the online learning platform.

Whether students chose the unessay or the essay, across the semester they received guidance and produced scaffolded, formative assignments aimed at supporting the research project. In week 5, brief video “tours” and an online lesson helped students to navigate the relevant newspaper databases. In week 6, students submitted a 25-word, unmarked statement of their proposed topic. In week 8, students were assessed on a research question and annotated bibliography, worth 25 percent of their final grade. By this point, students had to have decided whether they would produce an essay or an unessay. A one-on-one consultation with the instructor was required before a student could proceed with the unessay. The intention
was to prompt thinking through the relationship between form and content. In weeks 10 and 12, time was set aside in tutorials for group discussion of research projects, with a focus on peer-to-peer learning for workshopping contentions and navigating research obstacles.

The next three sections offer insight into the experience of “doing” the unessay with reports from this article’s student authors. They lay out observations on their cognitive and affective experiences. Taken together, they attest to the unessay’s significant educational outcomes in line with the task’s objective, beyond mastery of specific historical content, to cultivate empathy and creativity.

It seems that other Party members voted against Stalin. This has enraged him and he has ordered that the majority of the delegates get arrested. Luckily, you voted for Stalin and are spared. You are put in charge of building the Moscow Metro. The workers aren’t working fast enough as they don’t have enough to eat but to feed them you would need to take grain from the regions which are already starving.

Do you divert grain from the regions? Or Fall behind schedule?

You manage to make the gruelling journey to the border of the Soviet Union. When you cross, it you look back and wonder when you’ll be able to get back.

Despite having to leave behind everything you have ever known, at least you survived.

For now...

Surviving Stalinism (Claire Dowling)

“A challenge of the history unessay is that, to get at the first-person perspective, one needs to lean on primary sources, especially documents like diaries, which offer a window into personal experiences. I had to derive logical, realistic choices in my CYOA from diaries and other secondary sources to gain adequate context. For a Soviet history class, accessing such sources in English demanded time and perseverance. While engaging, the unessay was by no means the easier choice, as my research involved combing carefully through more material than I usually would have for a traditional essay.

With almost endless possibilities, the loose, open structure of the unessay is both a help and a hindrance. Like a traditional essay, there is the problem of ensuring one’s contention addresses the research question and is easy to follow. However, in an unessay, this is even more important, as it guides not just the content, but also the form. The most important advice I received when I was struggling with the unessay was to ask myself “what is the point of this work?” This question is relevant to all forms of research but was something I had not considered for traditional essays as the point of the work was always just to write an essay that would earn a good grade. Thus, the unessay forced me to think more deeply and explicitly about how and why we do research.”
Art in the Khrushchev Era (Katherine Robertson)

“I was surprised to discover that the research itself for an unessay differed significantly from that of a conventional essay. I believe students, and perhaps some instructors, tend to think that the unessay requires less research than a traditional essay. This was far from my experience. The unessay demanded the same, if not more, research to situate and deeply contextualize the primary material properly. I had to think critically and creatively about the broader social contexts and synthesize large amounts of information. In other words, I was compelled to mobilize research and analytical skills at a high level. In creating the fictional characters and the relationships required for the unessay, I had to move beyond reporting what my research uncovered; instead, I had to construct a vision of the past that I then to some degree projected myself into and inhabited.

This process of researching and producing the unessay provided a valuable learning experience on the place of empathy in historical research. By researching in depth the relationships between people and art and using this knowledge to construct a fictional but historically-informed world, I related to them on a personal level. I found myself appreciating the uncertainty of living in the Khrushchev era as a young artist, or as someone interacting with art. Previously, when writing a conventional essay on similarly complex subjects, I intellectually understood conflicting motivations. Through the unessay, I grasped them on an added emotional level. One of the pitfalls for history students is to judge past actors by modern values. I found that the unessay helped to limit this inclination toward presentism, as I was able to put myself in my protagonists’ shoes. I felt compelled to represent the past as authentically as possible, within the constraints of using only English language sources. It offered an invaluable lesson on the role of historians as the curators of the past and the need to fulfil this role conscientiously.”

(2) “What Two Canadian Artists Saw in Russia,” 21.
“Knowing that I would ultimately try to compose an original piece of music gave me a new perspective on primary and secondary sources. In my analysis of the original scores, I thought about the musical decisions and techniques applied and how this might be a source of inspiration. In imagining myself in the position of a composer during the Great Terror, questions of agency and freedom arose. Shostakovich was no longer some distant historical figure, but an intelligent, frightened man responding to denunciations in creative ways, embedding messages in his music. This process provided insight into the intentional nature of musical composition, fostering a sense of historical empathy for Shostakovich and his careful compositional process under the watchful eye of the Soviet state.

My unessay research supported the composition process amid an anxious swirl of uncertainties. Boundaries were ill-defined in assessment instructions due to the personal nature of each project. This flexibility was both the greatest benefit and drawback of the unessay, providing space for creativity, but also bringing a sense of uncertainty. Specifically, I was unused to having to define the scope of my own project and lacked confidence in my ability to execute it.

Beyond composing the piece, articulating my ideas and findings to a non-musically literate audience posed a significant challenge. In many ways, my chosen genre helped; instead of using words to convey a musical concept, I could demonstrate it. The piece showed, rather than told, how Shostakovich’s musicality and affective impact changed over time. But communicating my creative vision and its connection to my research findings was difficult to achieve through the exegesis alone. I had to consider accessibility to the listener. Michaels cautioned me that she could not read music and knew little about it. We agreed that an annotated version of the score, explicitly breaking down the decisions made, accompanied by a video to help her to understand the piece would be beneficial. The annotations helped me to think even more deliberately and explicitly about my intentions.”

Shostakovich and Stalinist Terror (Kelly Lin Huai Wong)
Conclusion

Reflections from this article’s three student authors point to the ability of the unessay to inspire active learning. Across the varied forms and contents of each project, our comments demonstrate how we each achieved a deeper understanding of Soviet history, grappled with questions of historical contingency, experienced a sense of historical empathy, and engaged creatively with the past. Through our conversations when writing this article, it became clear that we all viewed the unessay as demanding more extensive research, which threatened to grow the project to unmanageable proportions. Despite this challenge, our observations about how and what we learned point to the development of critical and creative thinking. We each achieved a deeper understanding of Soviet history.

Michaels, for her part, came to appreciate more fully the unease and confusion that comes from grappling with such an unbounded assessment task. It is imperative for expectations to be clear and parameters to be explicitly circumscribed. Tight, firm deadlines are required for scaffolded assignments. Students require repeated reassurance about expectations for scope and quality.

Our experience suggests that one of the most important aspects of the assessment design is the submission of an annotated version of the unessay, which helped to alleviate student concerns about how their work would be assessed. As Wong observes, the annotations allow the student an opportunity to tether the research directly to specific creative decisions. For the instructor, they work like footnotes to explain where elements originate and to render visible the student’s intentions. While the unannotated version allows for a direct experience of student creativity, for the purpose of assessment, the annotated version offers a clearer diagramming of the underlying research.

In closing, we note that all the student authors were pursuing double majors that paired with disciplines outside the humanities: Engineering (Dowling), Science (Robertson), and Education (Wong). Perhaps it is no coincidence that the unessay task appealed to students with varied interests. In classrooms where students come with different levels of engagement and skills, the unessay offers a mode of assessment that plays to a wide range of strengths to cultivate a creative, empathic engagement with the past.

Paula Michaels is an associate professor of History at Monash University (Australia). Distinguished by its transnational and comparative approach, her research examines the social history of medicine in the USSR. She is currently at work on a study of Soviet medical internationalism and the global Cold War.

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Call for Submissions:

2024 Beth Holmgren Graduate Student Essay Prize

Deadline: June 15

The Beth Holmgren Graduate Student Essay Prize is awarded for an outstanding essay by a graduate student in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies.

Essays should be submitted by the Chairs of the Regional Affiliates or Institutional Members’ primary representatives. Graduate students whose institution is not an ASEEES institutional member or is not holding a competition this year are advised to check the rules for their regional competition. Students cannot self-nominate their papers and must go through the proper nominating procedures.

Eligibility guidelines and nominating instructions can be found HERE.
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Boston Marriott Copley Place, Nov. 21-24, 2024
Virtual Convention, Oct. 17-18, 2024

Theme: **Liberation**

2024 ASEEES President: Vitaly Chernetsky, University of Kansas

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The authors’ introductory textbook of Albanian (Discovering Albanian 1, U. of Wisconsin Press, 2011) received the AATSEEL award for best annual contribution to language pedagogy. Now Slavica presents their intermediate-advanced textbook, *Advancing in Albanian*, to provide enhanced access for students to one of the major, but less commonly taught European languages. Albanian has been on track to join the EU since 2014, and there are 5 million speakers of this language. The language of instruction over the transition from English to Albanian as textbook and accompanying workbook is a major, but less commonly taught European language. Albanian has been on track to join the EU since 2014, and there are 5 million speakers of this language. The textbook and accompanying workbook transition from English to Albanian as the language of instruction over the course of the year, and are supported by substantial online downloadable audio files, making it more feasible to achieve proficiency in Albanian without extensive in-country experience.


Wojciech Wencel, born in Gdańsk in 1972, is one of the most important contemporary Polish poets. He is the author of many volumes of poetry, literary biographies, and essays, and the recipient of several prestigious literary awards, most recently the 2022 Oskar Halecki Prize in Polish and East European History. *Imago Mundi* and *Other Poems* is the first extensive translation of his work into English, which contains over eighty poems, beginning with his first book, entitled *Poems* (1995), and ending with *Polonia Aeterna* (2018).

**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.


Although *The Old Man* has been performed only rarely and *The Counterfeit Coin* has not even been translated into English until now, both works are deserving of far more attention than they have received. Here, Gorky moves beyond the social themes that predominate in his earlier plays to probe deeply into such matters as what constitutes justice, whether one individual has the right to judge another, the clash between reality and illusion, and the difficulty of distinguishing the false from the genuine. As Barry Scherr notes in his wide-ranging introduction, this is a Gorky for whom Ibsen has become no less a presence, who not only polemizes with Dostoevsky but cannot escape his influence, and who, by the mid-1920s, has absorbed lessons from Pirandello.


In this groundbreaking memoir, Anna Starobinets chronicles the devastating loss of her unborn son to a fatal birth defect. A finalist for the 2018 National Bestseller Prize, *Look at Him* ignited a firestorm in Russia, prompting both high praise and severe condemnation for the author’s willingness to discuss long-taboo issues of women’s agency over their own bodies, the aftereffects of abortion and miscarriage on marriage and family life, and the callousness and ignorance displayed by many in Russia in situations like hers.
Following Russia’s escalation against Ukraine in late February 2022, Moldova accommodated more Ukrainian refugees than any other European country, proportionally. This was reflected in one of Moldova’s self-promoted country mottos: “Small Country, Big Heart” [in Romanian: “Țară mică, inimă mare”]. The motto was devised by the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity [Partidul Acțiunii și Solidarității, PAS] of the incumbent president Maia Sandu. This might seem immodest to a foreigner visiting Moldova, but numerous statements by rank-and-file refugees and Ukrainian officials alike, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, speak for the fact that Ukraine is grateful for what Moldova did for the neighbouring country invaded by its Eastern Slavic not-anymore-brother. Even Transnistria, the breakaway Russian-controlled territory along the left bank of Dniester River, internationally recognized as belonging to Moldova, welcomed Ukrainian refugees. For a foreign observer, Transnistria being pro-Russian and welcoming Ukrainian refugees is confusing and incoherent. Indeed, to a certain extent, it is. But harboring pro-Russia sentiments and welcoming Ukrainian refugees in Transnistria is not a total contradiction. In 1992, during Russia’s war against Moldova, formally condemned only by Ukraine at that time, many Transnistrians found refuge in Ukraine. Today, they show their gratitude to the country that gave them a temporary shelter in dire times three decades ago.

The West as a whole, meanwhile, has become more interested than ever before in Moldova’s current issues, its past, and its future. International mass media and mainstream news channels and websites interview local and foreign experts on Moldova almost on a weekly basis. Western historians and other social scientists have visited Moldova quite often since the beginning of the war. In the last two years, more Western scholars from top-notch universities and renowned research centers have visited Moldova than in the 33 years since independence altogether. At least, that is the impression one gets from the vantage point of the archives. This is primarily because, once the war commenced, access to former Soviet archives dwindled dramatically. As the most important Soviet archives, located in Moscow and Kyiv, became difficult for international scholars to access after February 2022, many
have looked increasingly to non-Russian and non-Ukrainian archives. While the Soviet archives in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were a popular destination long before February 2022, now Moldova and, to a certain extent, Georgia and Armenia, have become important additions to the list.

Notably, a new policy toward archival access in Moldova had already been announced before the war started. That was a result of the historical victory of Maia Sandu in the 2020 presidential elections and, in the following year, of her party, PAS, in the parliamentary elections. For the first time in Moldova’s post-Soviet history, a party driven by clear-cut democratic and pro-Western values received 67 out of 101 legislative seats. The resulting government was the first to include the modernization of archives in its programs’ priorities. It also embarked on a new “memory policy” aimed at harmonizing interethnic relations and going beyond the deep divide—originating in the early 1990s—between the Romanian-speaking population (some identifying as Moldovans, others as Romanians) and the Russian-speaking minorities, including the Gagauz Turkish-speaking and Christian Orthodox communities in the south.

PAS’ doctrine in bringing together Moldovan society is that no matter one’s ethnic, linguistic, or religious allegiance, everybody should be, first and foremost, loyal to the Moldovan state. In other words, having multiple identities is not a problem, as it is normal in the global age to have more than one—though one must choose one over the other when they are at odds with each other.

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This has new resonance in the context of the war: those Russian-speakers who sympathize with Russia’s aggression against Ukraine seem to constitute a lethal threat to Moldova’s independence and its European future. Moldovan identity is viewed as a sum of manifold identities glued together by a shared official language, Romanian, and a familiarity with the basic facts of its national history, which is understood and conceptualized since 1990 as part of a history of Romanians (i.e., the space in which Romanian-speaking population are a majority). In contrast to claims by some, PAS’ doctrine on the identity issue is not a neo-Soviet doctrine justifying the existence of separate Romanian and Moldovan identities. The Soviets insisted the latter were antagonistic and irreconcilable, criminalizing Moldovans who identified as Romanians being criminalized and exile them, first to Siberia during Stalin’s rule and after 1953, to psychiatric hospitals. PAS’ viewpoint, shared by more and more Moldovans, no matter their ethnic allegiance, is that there should be two states with Romanian-speaking majorities, Romania and Moldova, and that the trauma of the Soviet occupations of 1940 and 1944 could be resolved within the European Union, assuming that after Moldova joins the EU, state borders will become symbolic.

In the last few years, the national archives have received an important increase in terms of financial support from the government. This support went into modernizing its premises, improving the conditions in which files are preserved in its warehouses, using microclimate to buffer unstable conditions, and disinfecting files affected by various pathogens, but also digitizing the inventories and their uploading on the website of the state archives, run by the National Agency of Archives (Agenția Națională a Arhivelor, ANA). Though the name is misleading, the latter is the corresponding institution of the National Archives in the United States, France, UK, or Romania. At the
moment, more than 5,000 inventories, of fonds spanning the Middle Ages to the post-Soviet period, are available online for download in searchable PDF format. Uploading the inventories online and increasing the visibility of what ANA is doing on social media and YouTube has contributed, among other efforts, to a rebranding of the Moldovan archives within Moldova, in the region, and worldwide. Due to these changes in access and digitization, and the impact of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, ANA has been visited by more researchers from abroad since 2022 than in the last three decades combined. For experienced scholars or junior ones in the advanced stages of their research, ANA has organized roundtables at the archives and guest lectures at the Faculty of History and Philosophy at the State University of Moldova. Among the guest lectures in the last half a year were those of Catriona Kelly (Cambridge, UK), Sophia Horowitz (Harvard), and Suzanne Freeman (MIT).

At ANA, one can corroborate Soviet claims about the Holocaust with Romanian records in the same reading room.

In the last two years, the archives have also digitized several important fonds, such as the list of people deported by the Soviets from the Moldavian SSR in 1949, which includes about 35,000 names, or around 99% of those deported. Another digitized fond is the one on the Sfatul Țării, the quasi-parliament of Bessarabia that voted for a union with Romania on March 27, 1918. This project was made possible by a grant from RoAid, the Romanian Agency for International Development, which allowed the archive to buy two high-resolution scanners. The other digitized fond is very important for the politics of memory in present-day Moldova. This is the list of victims—killed or condemned to the Gulag, all in all about 10,000 persons—of the Great Terror of 1937-1938 in the interwar Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within Soviet Ukraine, the territory on the left bank of the Dniester River that today harbours the pro-Russian secessionist regime.

ANA has documents spanning five centuries, covering the history of three empires (Ottoman, Tsarist, and Soviet) as well as documents from the Romanian interwar and WWII periods. Importantly, ANA holds both Soviet and Romanian documents on the Holocaust in Bessarabia and Transnistria. It is well-known how subjective Soviet sources are, especially ones on the activities of the political police, but also on the Holocaust perpetrated by the Antonescu regime in Bessarabia and Transnistria. One way to address this is to corroborate the Soviet claims with Romanian records that document, in detail, the mass killings and conditions of detention in ghettos and camps. At ANA, one can do that in the same reading room.

ANA holds 19,000 files on the victims of the Soviet repression, all transferred to the archives from 2010 to 2016. Last May, ANA signed a collaboration agreement with the Service of Intelligence and Security (Serviciul de Informații și Securitate, SIS), formerly the KGB of the Moldavian SSR. As a result, the transfer of files has resumed after having been discontinued 6 years ago due to political changes after Igor Dodon, a pro-Russia politician, became President in 2016. In less than a year, ANA received two batches of 2,200 files each. This year, Moldova will commemorate 75 years since the biggest Soviet mass deportation, which took place in 1949. On this occasion, ANA has worked out a plan with the government to expedite the process of transferring, through December
2024, all files related to political repression spanning the whole Soviet period. This amounts to about 100,000 files from the ex-KGB archives and the Ministry of the Interior. This is due to the support we have from President Maia Sandu, Prime Minister Dorin Recean, Speaker of the Parliament Igor Grosu, former Minister of Justice Sergiu Litvinenco and his ex-General Secretary Stela Ciobanu, and current Minister of Justice Veronica Mihailov-Moraru. This is all a part of an effort Moldova is making to distance itself from the Soviet past, denouncing CIS agreements, including on archival domain, and preparing to join the EU in the future. This is, to put it bluntly, a part of decolonization, and modest contribution to the worldwide process of de-centering Soviet history and giving voice and agency to non-Russian peoples.

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ANA also invites foreign scholars who are doing research on the historical periods post-1940 and post-1953, as every document issued by Soviet state and party institutions, including the top-secret osobaya papka and personal files of nomenklatura, is declassified and accessible for photocopying. Foreign researchers can have their first order of 20 files in as little as one hour after their arrival, up to 20 files for each subsequent day, and are able to photocopy any file for a symbolic 50 USD cents per file (delo), no matter the number of pages per file.
You describe yourself as a “historian of citizenship and inequality in Soviet Eurasia” and have conducted research in eight countries of the former Soviet Union as well as in the United States. What about these subjects prompted you to pursue research in multiple countries?

Back in 2007–2008, I worked for a summer as an intern for Memorial Society’s Information and Research Centre in St. Petersburg before spending my full junior year abroad in Moscow and Berlin. Over the course of the year, I had the opportunity to travel broadly, both within provincial Russia—as far as the White Sea in the north, Astrakhan in the south, and Ekaterinburg to the east—as well as to Central Asia, the Baltic region, and Ukraine. My travels familiarized me not merely with the center of the former Soviet Union, but also its former “peripheries.” I was struck both by the profound differences and similarities of what I observed. In graduate school, I found that existing scholarship—after more than two decades of extensive work on nationalities policy—did much to explain differences across former Soviet space but was less satisfying on what united it. Of course, there were older answers focused primarily on oppression, but these told only part of the story.

When considering how to approach my dissertation topic, I knew that questions about the ideas, institutions, and practices that unified citizens across a diverse geographic and cultural spectrum needed to be answered by extended consideration of non-Russian spaces and with knowledge of non-Russian languages. Especially early in my research, I was fortunate to spend extended periods abroad in language study and archival research, which shaped the questions and ideas that I had going into archives. This has enabled me to consider various localities on their own terms and not merely from the viewpoint of Moscow. I designed my research to take advantage of Ukraine’s and Qazaqstan’s comparative archival openness, which offered counterpoints to views from Moscow. Extended time on the ground—both in archives and talking to language teachers, host families, friends, and colleagues—reinforced that these so-called “peripheries” were never peripheral but were rather central sites where citizens navigated the possibilities, limitations, and contradictions of belonging.
in the Soviet Union. I sometimes think in terms of a comparison: what would it be like to study U.S. history, but do research only in Washington, D.C. and maybe New York City, and turn around to make claims about what it meant to be American? We know instinctively that this approach could only offer a narrow view, yet we often normalize this approach in Soviet history. To me, the breadth of my archival research—which expanded gradually over time, as opportunities presented themselves and the book project got stalled through contingent employment and the pandemic—provides critical perspectives on the diversity of experiences across the Soviet Union.

What are the advantages and challenges of a multilingual, multi-country archival project? What advice would you offer to scholars interested in developing projects that might take advantage of archival materials in multiple countries?

Most obviously, working in multiple countries enables researchers to take advantage of different schemes of access and availability. Ukraine and Lithuania have provided relatively open access to files of state security organizations like the KGB, and Qazaqstan is currently in the process of declassifying files related to Stalin-era repression. In other cases, certain processes are more visible at the local level—for example, the integration and Sovietization of Western Ukraine looks different from Moscow than it looks from Ivano-Frankivsk. Republic capitals give a more expansive view into the local level, whereas what got filtered up to Moscow in reports tended to be only the most exceptional cases. Research in republics can also offer insight into those Soviet institutions and practices that were quite decentralized. For my work, this includes education curricula and “new rituals” for weddings and funerals, which were typically republic initiatives. For me personally, the breadth of my research has made me more sensitive to patterns and deviations, especially as I gathered experience. This has, in turn, allowed me to work more efficiently and effectively in subsequent trips, even in new places and archives.

One benefit of researching the history of a relatively centralized and hierarchically organized country is that archives of the former Soviet Union tend to work in particular, familiar patterns, with institutions and practices that largely mirrored each other from republic to republic, and between republics and Moscow. In some respects, this makes it easy to jump into a new setting and make sense of the institutional records. At the same time, it is a mistake to think we can simply substitute research in various non-Russian republics for research that we might have done in Moscow, without considering the specific local contexts and languages in which materials are produced. Scaling up projects to include additional sites must come with increasing responsibility to grapple with local particularities. Ideally, this means finding ways to work with the materials produced in non-Russian languages, whether through language study or with the help of research assistants.

My biggest piece of advice is to immerse yourself in the languages, history, and culture of places where you plan to do research to the greatest extent possible, ideally before you go. It is a problem when we think we can parachute into new places without substantively altering our research approach. Especially problematic is a tendency to skip over documents simply because they are written in languages we cannot read. For some researchers, research in non-Russian republics has been used to add a touch of local color. Our engagement with the historiography of those republics is often limited to a book or two on an exam field, in the interests of breadth of coverage, rather than extended immersion in local questions and interpretations. Our training and research questions should evolve in conversation with the places where we do our work, and it is our responsibility to familiarize ourselves with those specific contexts and histories.
Tell us about the commonalities and differences you experienced as a researcher in libraries and archives across the former Soviet Union. What surprised you? To what extent did these experiences influence your understanding or interpretation of your subject(s)?

Archives and libraries were all part of the Soviet state, so there is a high level of familiarity when entering these institutions—even those that have opened since independence. The biggest differences are often in terms of working conditions, like how fast documents get delivered, rules and terms governing photography, the extent of various collections, and the degree of digitization. Some places make it easier to accomplish a lot in short trips, especially if you can peruse collection registers online before arrival and preorder documents. In other cases, you need longer on the ground to accomplish the same tasks. One of my biggest recent surprises was discovering that the National Library of Lithuania is a lending institution—I was somewhat taken aback when I was allowed to walk out of the library with old textbooks and a due date for returning them. The availability of Wi-Fi at the National Archives of Estonia, in Tartu, was likewise a delightful discovery—as was the rapid delivery of documents, often within half an hour. Other places remain significantly more bureaucratic, requiring more time and sometimes connections to do the work you would like to do. It took me months to be allowed into the Central State Archive of the Republic of Tajikistan—and that was a best-case scenario.

On a more intellectual level, my biggest impression from more than a decade of archival experience is that the Soviet Union was far more complex, varied across regions, and diverse than we often appreciate. In almost all cases, policies conceived in Moscow had to be realized, adapted, and interpreted on the ground in diverse communities, members of which participated in central policies and pushed local initiatives on their own terms and in pursuit of their own goals. While we of course know this in theory, realities are even more messy on the ground than we sometimes expect. The stories we tell from Moscow almost never grapple with that full complexity, other than to gesture toward it. I also have found that attempts to understand, document, and work with non-Russian peoples were highly developed and sophisticated (if not always successful), something I came to appreciate primarily through materials in non-Russian languages.

What new challenges of archival research, particularly but not exclusively pertaining to the Soviet Union, have emerged since the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine? What other challenges do you see impacting this field? How do these challenges resemble or differ from, for example, those which scholars faced prior to 1991?

Our current challenges operate on several levels. Most concerning are the ones faced by those living and dying in the region we study, especially Ukrainians who have taken up arms, live under occupation, or are threatened by missile strikes. No discussion of our challenges as researchers should begin without an acknowledgement of the severe crisis facing Ukrainians, including scholars whose academic institutions and homes are literally under fire. I also worry about the physical destruction of libraries, archives, cultural sites, and academic institutions. There are also the separate and different challenges facing Russian citizens who oppose the war, especially those speaking out and facing consequences, and those experienced by citizens of other former Soviet countries living under authoritarian regimes of various stripes.

As researchers in the U.S., our challenges are less grave, but the work patterns to which we have become accustomed are nevertheless changing substantially. I was lucky to come of age as a historian at a time of archival excess. Of course, there have always been limitations to the topics available for research. Archives themselves are products of the historical conditions that determined what was to be catalogued as part of the historical record (and what was not). Still, it is sobering to think of the changed

Whittington conducting archival research in Tajikistan. Photo by Anna Whittington.
archival landscape, as most of us choose for moral but also institutional, financial, and safety reasons to avoid Russia.

Immerse yourself in the languages, history, and culture of places where you plan to do research to the greatest extent possible, ideally before you go. It is a problem when we think we can parachute into new places without substantively altering our research approach.

In most respects, we are in a far better place than before 1991, both because of the wide range of archival access across many parts of the former Soviet Union and the many collections of published documents that have appeared in the interim. Even without being able to research in Russia, I am confident people will continue to produce nuanced, innovative histories, perhaps now with more attention to the impacts of policies in non-Russian republics. In general, we have tended to prioritize archives over the enormous storehouses of published sources and digitized materials, so a little course correction to take advantage of such materials is a welcome development.

Thinking long term, perhaps the biggest challenge created by the combined effects of both the pandemic and Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine is that our students have limited first-hand experience with Russia, and in some cases, with international travel at all. This is already true for undergraduates, who saw programs resume in Russia post-pandemic only to have them cancelled in the wake of the full-scale invasion. Even many of our graduate students have now never been to Russia. Sending students to places like Almaty, Bishkek, or Daugavpils certainly fills in some of the gaps in terms of language study, but we need to encourage and guide students to consider what it means to study Russian in sites of Russian/Soviet colonization, where Russian remains prominent because it was the language of empire. This requires sensitivity and attention to the specific histories of places where students now study. In an ideal world, such programs would include introductory instruction in local languages.

One other major challenge we face as a field is the dramatic decline in investment in language study, which becomes an especially acute problem as the linguistic demands of doing research increase. As students and researchers head to non-Russian republics for research, it will be ever more necessary to have not only Russian proficiency but also additional languages of the former Soviet Union. Increasingly, however, students struggle to get where they need to be even for Russian. While Russian-language instruction was never universal, many universities have scaled back or eliminated language departments and removed foreign language requirements.

The decreased emphasis on study abroad, too, has cascading effects on language proficiency. Meanwhile, AI-driven translation tools—while invaluable—contribute to a general undervaluing of linguistic skills. I would love to see more prospective PhD students embrace MA programs in area studies as critical stepping stones for future academic careers. These programs develop necessary skills by providing advanced Russian language instruction, creating pathways for studying non-Russian languages, honing research and writing skills, and deepening area studies knowledge in a holistic sense. Many prospective students, however, prefer to apply straight to PhD programs, figuring there will be time to cultivate the language skills necessary. There often isn’t, especially if students are still working on Russian. There are some positive signs, though. I am especially heartened by the growth of online consortium-style programs for less commonly taught languages. Institutions like the University of Wisconsin, Indiana University, and Arizona State University have long been
on the forefront of offering summer language programs for more rarely taught languages. Still, we need both significantly more investment in teaching languages and more acknowledgment as a field of the importance and value of language study.

**How have you seen scholars adapt and react to this changed landscape? What tips or resources would you offer to scholars currently planning research travel to archives in the former Soviet Union?**

Historians are resilient and are responding in many ways. For one, there is more and more work that takes advantage of the myriad published materials available in libraries across the country. I am especially proud that my own university, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, sponsors year-round programs that enable researchers to access our incredible library collections as part of our mission as a public institution. Researchers benefit from our tireless Slavic Reference Service, as well as the academic year Open Research Laboratory and Summer Research Laboratory, which are run by the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center. I’ve seen lots of exciting new work that relies mostly or even entirely on published materials. Those with active library cards from the Russian State Library (“Leninka”) can also take advantage of enormous troves of digitized materials. In many cases, our obsession with archives has meant we have underutilized the materials most readily available. There is so much innovative scholarship that can be done without setting foot in an archive.

People are also adapting by researching in new places, traveling to countries that were not really on their radars as places to do research until possibilities of researching in Russia became foreclosed. I suspect the net result for our field will generally be positive, as current conditions in Russia became foreclosed. I suspect the net result for our field will generally be positive, as current conditions

Long before the dramatic opening of archives, historians were often on the forefront of creatively addressing the difficulties and limitations of sources. Being a good historian has always required a degree of flexibility, nimbleness, and creativity in unpacking the nuances and complexities of the past. It is important to remember that archives are not so much an end in themselves, but one tool among many for telling nuanced, complex histories. Even with some curtailing of archival access, we have still never had so many tools at our disposal—it is our job to take advantage of them!

Anna Whittington is a historian of citizenship and inequality in Soviet Eurasia. Her in-progress book manuscript, *Repertoires of Citizenship: Inclusion, Inequality, and the Making of the Soviet People*, explores the discourses and practices of Soviet citizenship from the October Revolution to the Soviet collapse. Drawing on sources collected in more than 30 archives and libraries in nine countries, the book demonstrates that Soviet leaders promoted a civic identity built on active participation in public life. People embraced this vision of equal citizenship across a wide geographic and cultural spectrum, even as ethno-linguistic, racial, gender, and spatial differences created disparities in their claims to this identity. As the book shows, the Soviet rhetoric of equality, inclusion, and multiethnic representation coexisted with systemic inequalities that shaped lived experiences. Inclusion and inequality were both fundamental to the articulation and experience of Soviet citizenship. Professor Whittington has also begun research on two additional projects. The first, tentatively titled *A Mirror for Society: Censuses in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union*, explores the history of enumeration, while the second, *Cacophony: The Unmaking of the Soviet Union*, considers the Soviet collapse from the grassroots level.

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2024 Cohen-Tucker Dissertation Completion Fellows

Michael Corsi
History, The Ohio State University
“El Dorado on the Rocks: The Ural Mountains and the Production of Scientific Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Russia”

My dissertation argues that the Russian empire—its scholars, institutions, and generous funding—was instrumental to the process of global scientific-knowledge production. It takes one part of the Russian empire—the Ural Mountains—as demonstrative of the influence Russia had over nineteenth-century scientific thought. The Ural’s contributions to nineteenth-century science included, among other things, discovery of the first indigenous European diamonds, development of new theories regarding the mineralogical composition of the planet, identification of the Permian geological period, and characterization of global weather systems and biodiversity. Discoveries such as these filled gaps in the scholarly understandings of the time and contributed to some of the most important scientific publications of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, my dissertation also examines intra-imperial networks alongside inter-imperial ones. It traces the ways in which Urals scientists collaborated with other experts and scientific institutions within the Russian empire, thereby demonstrating the contributions of this region to the growth of imperial-era science.

Jessica Ginocchio
English and Comparative Literature, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
“Intersecting Worlds: Animal Consciousness, Reality, and Imagination in Eastern European Fiction”

“Intersecting Worlds” examines the integration of animal minds into the narrative fabric of primarily Russian fiction across several epochs. From Lev Tolstoy’s war horses to Andrei Platonov’s blacksmith bear, animal points-of-view are used by many of Russia’s most prominent writers, ranging in technique from first-person animal narrators to animals as focal characters within larger narrative frameworks. Structured around three chapters and an epilogue, the project uses careful close readings to characterize representations of animal minds and contextualize them within literary aesthetics, contemporaneous scientific thought, and socio-political conditions. Spanning the period from 1865 until 1930, the central chapters encapsulate an era marked by profound intellectual, scientific, and socio-political shifts. In works by Tolstoy, Chekhov, Bulgakov, and Platonov, we can see the evolution of realism to modernism to early Soviet experimentation. A final epilogue examines the afterlife of these tendencies in the work of contemporary and postmodern writers from both Russia and Ukraine, including Viktor Pelevin, Tatyana Tolstaya, Linor Goralik, Victoria Amelina, and Andrei Kurkov. The dissertation seeks to answer fundamental questions about human-animal relationships, perceptions of animality, growing ecological consciousness, and the nature of reality itself. While it contributes to the growing field of scholarship interested in animals and environment Russian literary studies, though its specific interventions to marry the concerns of animal studies with narrative theory and cognitive literary studies. Ultimately, I hope to show that animals are not a niche concern, but a central one, and the project of imagining and narrating animal consciousness is fundamental to the study of narrative, theories of consciousness, and understandings of what it means to be human, to be alive, and to exist in the world.
Luke Jeske
History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
“Faith, Nation, and Empire: Nineteenth-Century Russian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land”

Throughout the nineteenth century, Russian Orthodox Christians made pilgrimage to Ottoman Palestine, or the Holy Land, a vital and dynamic part of religious and national life. Tens of thousands made the journey, relying on patchwork support systems to realize their dreams of walking in Jesus’ footsteps. Many considered the journey itself a manifestation of personal and collective piety, an act rewarded by God and capable of knitting together thousands of compatriots shuffling toward Jerusalem. Sharing a common destination, Russians diverged on how to practice and interpret pilgrimage. Whereas champions of imperialism stressed the projection of geopolitical power, others emphasized neutral piety. Some, mostly peasants, struck out on their own, embracing apocrypha and heterodox rituals while avoiding Russian officials. I argue that examining these developments in pilgrimage enables us to better understand the broader modernization of Russian Orthodox Christian religiosity, by which I mean the adaptation of religion to accommodate the myriad technological, social, cultural, and legal changes unfolding over the century. While scholars have produced insightful scholarship on various aspects of this religious revitalization, I am one of the first to examine it in the trans-imperial context of pilgrimage and thereby expose Orthodoxy’s tremendous capacity to mobilize the Tsar’s subjects. Drawing on travel memoirs, periodicals, and published archival materials generated around pilgrimage, I shed new light on the religious groundings of Russian ethno-nationalism and imperialism.

Weronika Malek-Lubawski
Art History, University of Southern California
“Between Moscow and Paris: Łódź and the Transnational Avant-garde Network”

My dissertation reconstructs the artistic network between Russia and Western urban centers through the activities of artists connected to Łódź, Poland. I study Russian-German sculptor Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951), Polish painter and art theoretician Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952), and Polish-Jewish painter and designer Henryk Berlewi (1894-1967), who were all crucial in facilitating international contacts and institutional collaborations between the avant-garde movements. Kobro and Strzemiński moved to Poland from Russia in 1921 and were the first artists to share and implement the ideas of revolutionary avant-garde there. Berlewi radically changed his art upon his encounter with Suprematism and carried this influence West after moving from Poland to Berlin and Paris. Strzemiński, Kobro, and Berlewi maintained a lifelong commitment to abstraction, that was reflected not only in their artworks, but also through self-publishing, teaching, and involvement in organizing collections and archives of contemporary art. I will highlight how these artists drew on the artistic discourse and institutional models that emerged during the Russian Revolution to re-imagine and implement avant-garde ideas in their new locations and contexts. In my argument, studying this artistic mobility allows us to broaden and de-center the histories of artists who were directly or indirectly influenced by the revolutionary avant-garde and departed from it to develop their individual art theories like Unism or Mechano-Faktura. My research draws on museum collections, primary sources, memoirs,
and institutional histories. I also consider the impact of archival gaps and the Cold War on the existing historiography. The temporal scope of my dissertation will focus on 1921-1939, but in my last chapter, I will analyze Kobro’s, Strzemiński’s, and Berlewi’s legacy in the 1950s and the 1960s.

Alexandra Noi  
History, University of California, Santa Barbara  
“From Ape to New Socialist Man: Soviet and Chinese Forced Labor Camps as Laboratories of Carceral Eugenics”

My dissertation is a comparative intellectual and social history of forced labor and reeducation in the Soviet Union and China. I study the ideas of human nature and practices of its transformation through the lens of incarceration. I conceptualize Soviet Gulag and Chinese Laogai forced labor camps as socialist scientific projects of molding humans and nature rooted in ideas of plasticity in the natural and social sciences of the early and mid–twentieth century. In the Soviet Union, those were Marxist ideas of the value of labor in the evolutionary transition “from ape to man,” as Friedrich Engels wrote, the theory of behavioral conditioning of the Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov, and the pedagogical methods of the Soviet Ukrainian educator Anton Makarenko. In China, social engineering was an intellectual fusion of indigenous theories of moral rehabilitation, Marxist and Leninist thought, Mao Zedong’s original contributions, and Soviet penal and educational experiments. I explore how in both countries the institutions and practices of forced labor were devised as a means to achieve revolutionary ends—the concurrent goals of modernizing the old “backward” society and economy, remaking people into new socialist citizens, and transforming the natural environment.

Nicholas Seay  
History, The Ohio State University  

My dissertation explores the technocratic intensification of cotton monoculture in post-WWII Soviet-Tajikistan, which in turn was used to increase the USSR’s industrial-use cotton supply and as exports on the global market. I argue that this intensification produced a series of crises in environmental protection and allocation of labor resources, prompting reform-minded scientists and state agency employees to respond with several technocratic responses that addressed isolated problems, but fell short of directly attacking the monoculture itself, a non-negotiable feature of relations between Moscow and Central Asian Republics like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. To increase the yearly harvests of raw cotton, planners and collective farms made production more efficient through rational use of water resources, irrigating previously uncultivated lands, new seed selection strategies, and the production and application of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. By utilizing an environmental and materialist approach and analyzing how state officials responded to these crises, my research shows how the case of Tajikistan’s cotton production speaks to important north-south dynamics within the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Soviet “empire” and how the case of Soviet cotton fits within global economic and environmental trends of the late-20th century.
John Webley
Slavic Languages and Literature, Yale University
“Ink, Paint, and Blood: India and the Great Game in Russian Culture”

Ink, Paint, and Blood examines Russian depictions of India created during the so-called Great Game, the rivalry between Britain and Russia for dominance in Asia. As a framework for understanding history, the Great Game (or Tournament of Shadows in Russian) reduces the complex, multipolar politicking between Europe and Asia down to a sensational story of spies and soldiers clashing on the Roof of the World. Nonetheless, scholars have demonstrated how this rivalry emerged as a dominant theme in Victorian media—even before the term ‘Great Game’ entered popular usage. Far less attention has been paid to how Russia created, imagined, and responded to this rivalry. My work elucidates the dominant concerns that emerged in Russia’s “Great Game” media—mapping, border disputes, espionage, surveillance, political upheaval, and trade—and shows how these themes adhered repetitive aesthetic dimensions. I achieve this through a trans-medial approach, which brings together travelogues, architecture, painting, poetry, material culture, and ballet from Russia, Britain, and India. By focusing on Russian depictions of India, my work shows how the discourse of the Great Game enabled Russians to articulate their own imperial aesthetic through comparison, mimicry, and differentiation from the British. As Russians retraced the journeys made by British explorers, spies, conquerors, and artists, they used their own creative practices to inspect British imperial culture and its forms. In drawing attention to both the narrative and formal aspects of the Great Game, my project reveals the broader impact that this rivalry had on shaping Russian imperial ideology and aesthetics.

Yacov Zohn
History, University of Wisconsin-Madison
“Tactical Representation: Political Goals in the Soviet National Soccer Team (1952-1972)”

My dissertation probes the fractured political nature of soccer in the Soviet Union through the lens of the Soviet national soccer team from the team’s official genesis in 1952 to the end of its “golden era” in 1972. The sport featured a complex representation of governmental organizations, industries, politicians, and sports administrators who actively intervened in sporting affairs, vying for power and influence. My research explores institutions, individuals, and empire to investigate the political complexities and divides that festered in and around the Soviet soccer team in the struggle to shape its image as an icon of “Soviet” identity. I am particularly interested in examining the reasons behind the shifting locus of representation embodied by the national team: why and how Moscow, endowed with all of the USSR’s most important political institutions, dominant sport institutions, and the best clubs in the country, lost its monopoly on the national team, with Tbilisi and especially Kyiv growing in importance. My dissertation explains how a mix of key individuals, political changes, shifting societal norms, strengthening nationalism, fragmentation of power in Moscow, evolving regional sport/governmental institutions, and hockey (of all things) played a role in significantly impacting the national team’s meaning, composition, and results. The scope of my project incorporates little known regional sport publications, newspapers, interviews, and memoirs of key participants, as well as research in archives, libraries, and online sources across the USA, Switzerland, Germany, France, England, Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia.
Spotlight on Academic Blogs

An Interview with Blog Editors at H-Russia, H-Ukraine, The Jordan Center Blog, and Peripheral Histories?

NewsNet thanks Emily Elliott, Associate Director of Research and Publications at H-Net, for conceiving of, conducting, and providing the introduction for this interview, as well as the blog editors, Oleksa Drachewych (H-Russia’s Decolonizing Russian Studies), John Vsetecka (H-Ukraine’s Spotlight Interview Series), Maya Vinokour (The Jordan Center Blog), and Susan Grunewald (Peripheral Histories?) for their participation and insights. Thanks also to the Peripheral Histories? editorial team, Catherine Gibson, Siobhán Hearne, Jo Laycock, Hanna Matt, and Alun Thomas, for their input.

Academic blogs have grown in numbers, reach, and importance over the last decade, covering almost every thematic and geographic subfield. These blogs serve as places not only to share summaries of new research, but also to foster conversation among academics, students, policymakers, organizations, and the public. In the field of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, blogs have become ever more important following Russia’s war in Ukraine. The scholars who run these blogs play an important role in bringing diverse perspectives on important topics, but running an academic blog is a time-consuming task that requires a host of scholarly, editorial, and technical skills that often go unnoticed. More often than not, contingent and early career scholars are the individuals overseeing these critical resources. Today, we pull back the curtain and speak to the scholars behind four blogs in the field to understand and appreciate this work.
What motivated you to start this blog? What content were you hoping to develop? What questions were you hoping to answer?

**H-Russia**: The discussions that I noticed happening both on social media and in public-facing online publications about decolonizing Russian studies led me to start the H-Russia *Decolonizing Russian Studies* blog. The discourse around the subject was happening on different planes with little direct debate and discussion. People conflated decolonizing Russian studies with calls to decolonize Russia, two different issues, even if there may be overlap. Plus, social media is not always conducive to deep conversations about important academic discussions. The blog therefore became my way of using the strength of H-Net’s moderated platform to offer a place for this important dialogue to happen in a meaningful way. I had hoped to see contributors speak on their experiences looking at Russian or Soviet history topics from different perspectives, highlight existing works that could be used as models for decolonizing Russian studies, and reflect upon what assumptions underwrite the field. Additionally, I wanted to include a forum for those who disagreed with the approach or who did not feel it useful to allow genuine conversation about the topic. It would allow scholars to share their skepticism and the opportunity to highlight what the field has already done, while also allowing scholars to debate, discuss, and learn from one another, especially as there are many different generations of scholars and a variety of viewpoints on what I feel is an important question in our field.

**H-Ukraine**: The emergence of the *H-Ukraine Spotlight Interview Series* corresponded with the official launch of *H-Ukraine* on H-Net in 2019. Our simple but significant goal was to give Ukrainian studies a more visible platform in digital humanities spaces. In thinking through how to utilize H-Ukraine’s platform to the fullest, I decided that an interview series with authors working on various Ukraine-related topics would be a great way for scholars and others to get to know those working in the field of Ukrainian studies more comprehensively. The content that I was interested in developing were short, digestible interviews that highlighted the respective scholar’s work, introduced their current research, and allowed others to get to know them in a more personal way. I was not seeking to answer questions so much as I was hoping for these interviews to elevate the voices of those working on Ukrainian topics that had been overlooked, unheard, or ignored.

**Jordan Center Blog**: This is an easy one, since I did not found the *Jordan Center Blog*. Instead, I had greatness thrust upon me. I began as Editor in 2018, at which point the Blog had already existed for several years. Its purpose was to publicize the affairs of the NYU Jordan Center (e.g., panels, conferences, and talks) and to attract further attention to the REEES field as practiced at NYU and beyond through fun, interesting content. My colleague, Eliot Borenstein, singlehandedly authored many of the early posts, which was delightful but couldn’t go on forever due to the finite nature of time.

**Peripheral Histories?**: The idea for the *Peripheral Histories?* blog came from a conference held at the University of Manchester in April 2015. The conference aimed to bring together graduate students and early career scholars to share their works in progress and to emphasize research on the regions and peoples of
the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that have been viewed as geographically, politically, or culturally “peripheral,” as opposed to those anchored in the often overstudied and overemphasized “center.” The conference attracted a large and internationally-based contingent of participants, who often felt isolated in their departments due to their marginalized topics of study. After the conference, a small group of attendees felt it was necessary to find a new format to continue these fruitful conversations and to build networks for these topics of study. They chose to establish themselves as the editorial board of the Peripheral Histories? blog and began to solicit contributions.

Who was your intended audience for this blog, and how did they receive the blog? How has your audience changed or grown over time?

**HR:** Academics of Russian, Slavic, Soviet, and Eurasian studies are the main audience. The blog has gotten some good attention, particularly from junior scholars who are grappling with these ideas, and from scholars who often feel they are outside of Soviet or Russian history. Especially early on, the first couple of posts generated an important dialogue that highlighted a lot of the fault lines regarding this topic. Other blogs have reached out either to jointly publish blogs important to both our audiences, and journals have agreed to reproduce some of the discussion, ensuring it will continue to find new audiences.

**JCB:** At the beginning, our intended audience consisted of scholars in the field from an array of SEEES-related disciplines: not only cultural or literary scholars like Eliot and me, but also historians, anthropologists, political scientists, art historians, sociologists, media theorists, and so on. Over time, the mission has evolved to include educated laypeople, and my vision for the future is that the blog become an academic-focused but highly publicly accessible resource for anyone interested in better understanding Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

**HU:** There have always been a few intended audiences for the H-Ukraine Spotlight Interview series. The first audience was, obviously, H-Ukraine subscribers. I wanted to create content that subscribers would find interesting and fresh and highlight new work going on in their field(s) that they may have otherwise not known about. The second audience that I had in mind was the broader scholarly community in the United States, to whom I wanted to demonstrate that those working on Ukraine have produced fascinating new research and used innovative methodologies to tackle important questions. The third intended audience I wanted to serve was academics in Ukraine. Part of our initiative at H-Ukraine is to build academic communities across borders, and it was important to us to help build more bridges between scholars in Ukraine and scholars in North America. The interviews I have done so far have been well received, and now authors regularly reach out to me and ask to be featured. The audiences mentioned above still represent the majority of our readership, but Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 helped bring our work to new audiences. Now, journalists, NGOs, think tanks, government workers, and members of the public all read our content.

**PH:** The initial audience was graduate students and early career researchers. At first, the editorial board solicited contributions from contacts. Through word-of-mouth, and some initial funding from Sheffield Hallam University for the website domain, the blog grew in popularity and readership, which allowed the editors to transition to open calls for submissions on a rolling basis. Through blog posts, publicity on social media, shorter publications in journals such as *Ab Imperio,*
and presentations at conferences such as ASEEES and BASEES, the Peripheral Histories? blog has grown into a substantial repository of posts, author interviews, teaching tips, and guides for online research and digital humanities projects. The site now includes over 100 posts by more than 90 different authors located in 22 countries. We have also continued to offer online events over Zoom, bringing together academics and non-academics from around the world.

Scholars most often think of the contents of a blog they read, but there is a lot of behind-the-scenes work that scholars might not realize. Can you share a bit about how you chose your content management system, recruiting authors, and publicizing your blog? You might choose to address the unseen aspect that you found most challenging.

**HR:** Most of the submissions came from volunteers, but I did attempt to directly solicit pieces from some scholars. This is a topic many in the field are grappling with and some may not know where they stand or be unwilling to share their still developing thoughts. Additionally, with the Russian war in Ukraine taking place, I am aware of, including from my own personal experience, the emotional labor many in the field are going through as we are following this war often with a very personal connection. Many scholars are overextended and while there has been interest in contributing, their limited time and other commitments make it hard to firmly determine a potential deadline. Some of these individuals I will be circling back to this summer, while I will be continuing more significant promotion through H-Russia’s listserv, social media, and other platforms.

**HU:** It’s true, running any kind of blog requires a lot of behind-the-scenes work that is invisible labor. At H-Ukraine, we have a few blogs that are each managed by different editors. As the managing editor of the Spotlight Interview series, I have the privilege of choosing who I want to feature in each interview. I do my best to feature a range of voices, including women, LGBTQ+ scholars, BIPOC scholars, and those working in precarious academic employment or in academic...

Many in the field are grappling with [the topic of decolonizing Russian studies]...I am aware of the emotional labor many in the field are going through as we are following this war.

The “Blog” section on H-Russia and H-Ukraine, part of the larger H-Net network.
adjacent/non-academic sectors. Representing the diverse nature of Ukrainian studies is something I work hard to do, and it is, perhaps, not something always immediately visible to those who read the interviews. I often reach out to scholars after reading something of theirs that I think deserves more attention, and we organize interviews from there. Everyone is busy, so it can be difficult to get some scholars to follow through with their interviews due to their schedules. However, I have no deadlines for these, so I do my best to be as flexible as possible. Once the author sends me their written responses, I spend time editing, formatting, and then publishing them on H-Ukraine. I then promote them on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other relevant social media platforms. Running the whole operation requires one to be a scholar, editor, manager, and publicist! Wearing many hats is worth it, though.

The project seeks to challenge the idea that the ‘big story’ could only be told in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

**JCB:** Posting content with high disciplinary diversity three times a week requires about 10-15 hours of weekly input from me. Until a couple of years in, I worked entirely alone, but since then, I’ve been fortunate to have the assistance of a Managing Editor. The bulk of that person’s time is spent recruiting content by reaching out to scholars, who are doing interesting work. Often these are people who have already published or presented on something interesting, and we’re asking them to do a short and public-facing version of their article or conference talk for the Blog. Academics tend to be very busy and are more willing to adapt an existing piece of work than to write something totally new. So, the strategy of soliciting contributions based on existing work has worked well so far, in terms of both getting “yeses” and platforming exciting new research across SEEES subfields. Since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we’ve also made an effort to publish timely contributions. We’ve had eyewitness reports from Kyiv, open letters on behalf of Zhenya Berkovich and the DOXA editors, translations of articles from Meduza, and of-the-moment analysis on topics like Lavrov’s antisemitic comments about Zelensky, Prigozhin’s death, and more. Even with help, my biggest challenge is finding the time to work with authors from submission to publication. But at the end of the day, I love the Blog and wouldn’t have it any other way.

**PH:** In terms of editorial work, submissions are reviewed by two members of the editorial board for approval, revisions, or rejection. We recruit authors through a mixture of open calls on social media, networking at conferences, and direct solicitations. As the social media landscape changes, we are receptive to adapting our publicity plans in the future. A larger challenge is the debate over the dichotomy between “centers” and “peripheries” of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union model in the field. Many fail to notice the question mark in the official title of the blog, Peripheral Histories?, which emphasizes that the mission of the blog is the very idea that the “periphery” was never peripheral to Russian imperial and Soviet history. Our goal has always been to shift academic focus away from the metropoles of Moscow and St. Petersburg, largely in response to the context of British academia, where the initial editorial team was based, and where much of the research focused on the imperial centers or on the policies and practices which radiated out from them. The project seeks to challenge the idea that the “big story” could only be told in Moscow and St. Petersburg and show how important and diverse events, ideas, and peoples shape the overall evolution of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union from Kaliningrad and Kyiv to Kamchatka. These cases are indeed not peripheral; rather, engaging with the default model allows us to better emphasize the importance of these diverse peoples and regions in shaping the overall trajectory of imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet history.
Slavic Review 83.1 Spring 2024 Preview

CRITICAL FORUM: RUSSIA’S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The Invasion of Ukraine, the Quest for a Multipolar World, and Russia’s Civilizational Appeal to the Global South
Choi Chaterjee and Karen Petrone

Is Russia Losing in Ukraine but Winning in the Global South?
Kathryn Stoner

The Politics of Anti-Imperial Nostalgia: South Africa’s Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine
Thom Loyd

ARTICLES

Value, Price, and Economic Reform in the Polish People’s Republic
Brian Porter-Szücs

An Adventure for All Ages: History, Post-Memory, and Romance in Tomasz Różycki’s Twelve Stations
Łukasz Wodzynski

Staging the “Stolen Transition”: Conspiracy and Collusion in Postsocialist Crime Fiction
Anita Pluwak

Masculinity and (Hetero)Sexuality in the Late Imperial Russian Military
Siobhán Hearne

Archeologists Imagine Ukraine: Social Scientists and Nation Building in the Nineteenth Century
Louise McReynolds

Why Was Lina Shtern Not Executed? An Academic’s Strategy of Survival in the Late Stalinist Period
Maria Mayofis

ASEEES Mentoring
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The ASEEES mentoring program matches graduate students and recent PhDs with mid-career or senior scholars for a one-year mentoring relationship.

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Member News

Julie A. Cassidy was shortlisted for the Pushkin House Book Prize for her book *Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power, and Putinism*.

Amelia M. Glaser and Yuliya Ilchuk were shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize for their translation of *A Crash Course in Molotov Cocktails* by Halyna Kruk with Arrowsmith Press.


Muireann Maguire and Cathy McAteer published the open access edited volume *Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context* with Open Book Publishers.

Michael M. Naydan was awarded the Outstanding Contribution to the Profession Award by the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL).

Olha Tytarenko and Michael M. Naydan published a translation of The Ukrainian Mentality: An Ethno-Psychological, Historical, and Comparative Exploration by Alexander Strashny with ibidem Press.

Sunnie Rucker-Chang was awarded a $113,318 grant from the US Russia Foundation to support the project “Capacity and Equity Building in Russian Studies,” a collaboration with Krista Goff, Kelly Knickmeier Cummings, and Amarilis Lugo de Fabritz.

Steven Seegel was awarded the 2024 Vega Medal by the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography for his scientific contributions to Human Geography.

Submit your book publications, promotions, or fellowships/grants/prizes/awards to Member News [here](#).

Institutional Member News

The Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program’s 2025-26 competition is now open, featuring over 400 awards in more than 130 countries. Attend [webinars](#) by topic to learn more about these diverse program offerings. Deadline September 16.

The Polish Institute of Arts & Sciences of America (PIASA) announces the 2024 prize winners:

**The Bronisław Malinowski Award**

*Tomasz Zarycki*, The Polish Elite and the Language Sciences: A Perspective of Global Historical Sociology (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

**The Oskar Halecki Award**

• Winner: *Malgorzata Fidelis*, Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland (Oxford University Press, 2022)

• Honorable Mention: *Kyrill Kunakhovich*, Communism’s Public Sphere: Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland and East Germany (Cornell University Press, 2022)

**The Rachel Feldhay Brenner Award**

• Winner: Yechiel Weizman, Unsettled Heritage: Living Next to Poland’s Material Jewish Traces after the Holocaust (Cornell University Press, 2022)

• Winner: Geneviève Zubrzycki, Resurrecting the Jew: Nationalism, Philosemitism, and Poland’s Jewish Revival (Princeton University Press, 2022)

**The Susanne Lotarski Award**

Larry Wolff, New York University

**The Karol Pilarczyk Award**

• Winner: Agnieszka Holland, filmmaker

• Winner: Wojciech Sadurski, University of Sydney

Pushkin House announced 2024 shortlist for the Pushkin House Book Prize. The award ceremony will be held June 14, 2024.