

This is an abstract artwork by Robert Rauschenberg, titled 'Abstract'. It is a dense, layered collage of various materials, including paper and fabric, in a wide range of colors and patterns. The composition is non-representational, featuring a mix of organic, torn edges and geometric shapes. Key elements include: a large yellow rectangular area at the top left; a horizontal strip of red and white vertical stripes; a large green rectangular area in the upper center; a blue rectangular area below the green; a central area with a pattern of small green dots and three overlapping green circles; a black rectangular area on the left with a series of vertical grey lines; a large blue area at the bottom left; a pink triangular shape at the bottom center; a large grey area at the bottom right with a series of vertical black lines; and various other smaller shapes and patterns in orange, red, and teal. The overall effect is one of complex, overlapping textures and colors, characteristic of Rauschenberg's 'mark-making' and collage work.



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Association for Slavic, East European & Eurasian Studies (ASEEEES), established in 1948, is a nonprofit, nonpolitical, scholarly society and is the leading private organization dedicated to the advancement of knowledge about Russia, Central Eurasia, and Eastern & Central Europe.

Tension and Symbiosis: A Roundtable Interview with Scholar-Translators

I asked ASEEES members who are also professional translators to share how their work in this other field informs their current projects and professional identity. Whether a full-time career, a side gig, a research area, or an occasion for gathering, translation has been central to these colleagues' engagement with our field. In this discussion, they challenge us to think beyond the very binary—scholarship versus translation—that occasioned their gathering.

— Fiona Bell (University of Utah), ASEEES Communications Advisory Committee

Fiona Bell: How did you get into translation?

Sibelan Forrester: I did some prose translations from Croatian as part of an exchange program abroad, then began translating poetry from Russian (Pavlova, Rostopchina, Zhadovskaia, Lohvitskaia) so I could teach it in class.

Shelley Fairweather-Vega: Translation was part of my duties at every internship and job I had before graduate school, so by the time I started my M.A., I was regularly taking small translation jobs. After finishing the degree, I kept up the freelance translation work while also holding down another part-time job and raising my kids. After about five years, I had enough work coming in to quit my day job and translate full time.

Jess Jensen Mitchell: Entirely by accident. Before graduate school, I'd done some translation and editing work for a Polish NGO, but I didn't consider myself a literary translator until later. On a whim, I decided to translate a hilarious Polish book for family and friends. That led to the [Emerging Translator Mentorship with Antonia Lloyd-Jones](#) and then I was hooked.

Russell Scott Valentino: I had a romanticized idea of translation since probably my late teens and didn't get a chance to actually engage in it seriously until graduate school, when Michael Heim taught a UCLA class through the comparative literature department. It was a turning point.

FB: What's one translation community, big or small, that you belong to? How has it influenced you?

SF: ALTA! ([The American Literary Translators Association](#)) It is the friendliest of all conferences, the senior people are very warm and welcoming to "emerging" translators, and everyone (even a total stranger who works from a different language) is good company and good for conversation. I like to say: because we're all automatically interested in at least one other person's work, we become more open to anyone's if it's interesting.



Mitchell conducting a reading at AATSEEL, 2026. Photo by Nadezhda Vikulina.



Forrester at AATSEEL with poet Elena Mikhailik, 2024. Photo by Milla Fedorova.

ALTA has been a source of connections, support, and commissions. The Slavic conferences (AATSEEL, ASEEEES) have subcommunities that are welcoming and supportive of translation, but it turns out that many of those people go to ALTA when they can.

SFV: I second the enthusiastic support for ALTA. I discovered it and went to my first conference about a decade into my career, when a greater portion of my work was suddenly translating whole books, rather than news articles or video game dialog or legal contracts. ALTA made such a good impression on me that I teamed up with a few other Seattle-based translators I'd met there and at the ALTA conference to start our own local gang, the [Northwest Literary Translators](#). For years now, we've been meeting just about every month for workshops, book talks, guest lecturers, panel discussions and readings. It's a wonderful community and more new people join us every time we meet.

JJM: I love ALTA for its low-key charm and regional locales (Milwaukee! Tucson! Portland!). This year, I had the full monty, going to ALTA, the [Bread Loaf Translators' Conference](#) in a workshop with Anton Hur, BCLT ([British Centre for Literary Translation](#)), and the [London Book Fair](#). Each one is worth going to for different reasons, from catching

up with friends, to establishing connections with translators from other languages, to meeting editors. I'd also like to add that the Polish translation community is very close-knit and friendly; we all know each other and collaborate.

RSV: Yes to ALTA. There's nothing else like it, in my experience. Faculty colleagues and graduate students at the two universities where I've spent the most time—Iowa and Indiana—have also been wonderfully supportive communities. Then the former graduate students have become faculty and industry colleagues at all sorts of places around the world, which amazes me whenever I think about it.

FB: How has your translation practice shaped you as a researcher?

SF: I am much more attentive to other scholars' creation/adaptation/use of translations, and I find that new scholarly insights emerge from making or examining translations. Translation studies as a field has become more and more interesting as I do more translating (and hear translators talk about their work).

SFV: I'm not affiliated with a university and the only research I really do is in service of my translation work. But one thing I'll say is that translators

who are also scholars and researchers can sometimes prioritize showcasing their research findings over producing a translation that is fit to purpose. It's wonderful to know everything about the historical background and cultural connotations of, say, a particular type of boots in your text. But then you need to step back and consider whether your readers will appreciate all that knowledge you've amassed. Maybe all they need to know is that they're cheaply made boots, or old boots, or stolen boots. Overloading the translation with true but unnecessary details risks changing a poem or short story into a lecture or encyclopedia entry. Perfect for some audiences, but not all.

JJM: My entire dissertation on Upper Silesia was born of a visit to a literary festival in honor of Jerzy Pilch, one of the authors I translate. I came to the festival to get a better sense of Pilch's world, and I left knowing that Upper Silesian identity and family memory were topics that needed to be explored in an academic context. Speaking more generally, my status as a translator has given me better access to Polish authors and publishing houses. I know far more about the book market now than I did as a graduate student, I can tell you that!

RSV: Some of my research is doing translation. Another part of it is about translation. My work is never far from some aspect of translation, so I'm sure I've internalized the practice in some ways that I'm not totally aware of. What I'm conscious of, I would say, is that it's taught me to read more thoroughly and ask precise questions about context. I may not have learned to listen and speak at the same time, the way that simultaneous interpreters do it, but almost.



Valentino working on translation, 2025. Photo by Yasuko Akiyama.

FB: As scholars and literary translators, can you tell me about a particular friction you experience moving between these two communities?

SF: Some scholars consider translation less important and valuable than their own work (much as some “lit people” look down on the “language ladies”), and I’m sure some translators get cross-eyed trying to read literary scholarship. I was lucky when I entered the profession that some of my senior colleagues were serious translators themselves and knew what was what.

I try to do as much as I can to contribute to the scholarly ecosystem that encourages my work, even though I’m outside that ecosystem.

SFV: I couldn’t be as successful as I have been at publishing my translations and having them read without help from colleagues with university connections, several of whom are also answering questions here. For any number of reasons, the region that produces the work I most like to translate – Central Asia – gets much more academic attention from

scholars than it does artistic attention from writers and readers. That means it’s mostly the scholars who review the books, invite me to give talks, and suggest future projects. In return, I try to do as much as I can to contribute to the scholarly ecosystem that encourages my work, even though I’m outside that ecosystem: I do peer reviews, offer career advice, speak at conferences. But as a freelancer, I’m always giving up paid work to do that kind of service. I can only go to conferences or take research trips on my own dime. So there’s an inequality there that can be vexing, one that colleagues with a steady university paycheck don’t always keep in mind. The positive side is that my time is truly my own to organize as well as I can.

JJM: Academic and literary audiences demand very different things. What is appealing and legible to an academic might be off-putting to an editor at a mainstream, or even an indie publishing house. I remember my first pitch session with an editor at one of the big five. Very kindly, she told me that the erudite, slightly arcane comp titles I’d mentioned were not going to cut it. Long story short, save the footnotes for your next article. Still, these two worlds need one another and exist in a kind of symbiosis.

RSV: I used to think along the lines of this question, especially when I was just starting out as both a translator and a faculty member. It has been some years since I have thought this way. I’m constantly working on translations, some of which are “artistic” while others are scholarly. I’m also constantly writing about translation, teaching some form of translation, editing translations, pitching them to presses, evaluating them for grants and other forms of support, reviewing them, and helping editors decide whether or not to publish them. I don’t separate these activities into scholarship and translation. It’s a privileged position to be in. I am always careful to discuss with junior colleagues the tension that can exist and to encourage them to pay careful attention to the attitudes of their colleagues as they decide how to spend their time.



Fairweather-Vega with Adeeb Khalid and journalist/writer Hamid Ismailov at Carleton College, 2026. Photo by Yaron Klein.

FB: Do you have any advice for incorporating translation into teaching, particularly for people teaching courses in English?

SF: I would draw attention to the value of comparing different/various translations (Russell has spoken persuasively about this); examining moments when an English translation we're reading can convey the wrong sense (often because English has more words with multiple meanings); and examining when the English translation isn't wrong so much as covering up ideologically loaded elements of the original.

SFV: Teach your students to be aware of translation, and to be aware that translation is complicated! There is always more than one possibility. No translation choice is neutral: there are always consequences, good and bad, to any decision a translator makes.

JJM: Translation is inherently political—the books that are available in English didn't arrive there by accident. It takes time, money, and interest to get foreign-language texts published on the Anglophone book market. English-speaking audiences are finally discovering how incredibly rich and *funny* Polish literature is. This revelation required decades of work from translators, as well as funding from organizations in and outside of Poland. A better understanding of the book market can help students refrain from making inaccurate judgments about which “national” literatures are worth reading. This comment will probably annoy language instructors, but I always laugh inwardly when first-year language students claim to prefer the original to a translation of the same title. It's great to feel that sense of accomplishment and to be aware that translation is a creative act by fallible humans (as it should remain), but a lot is going to go over your head

unless you really know the language. Trust the translator.

Translation is inherently political—the books that are available in English didn't arrive there by accident.

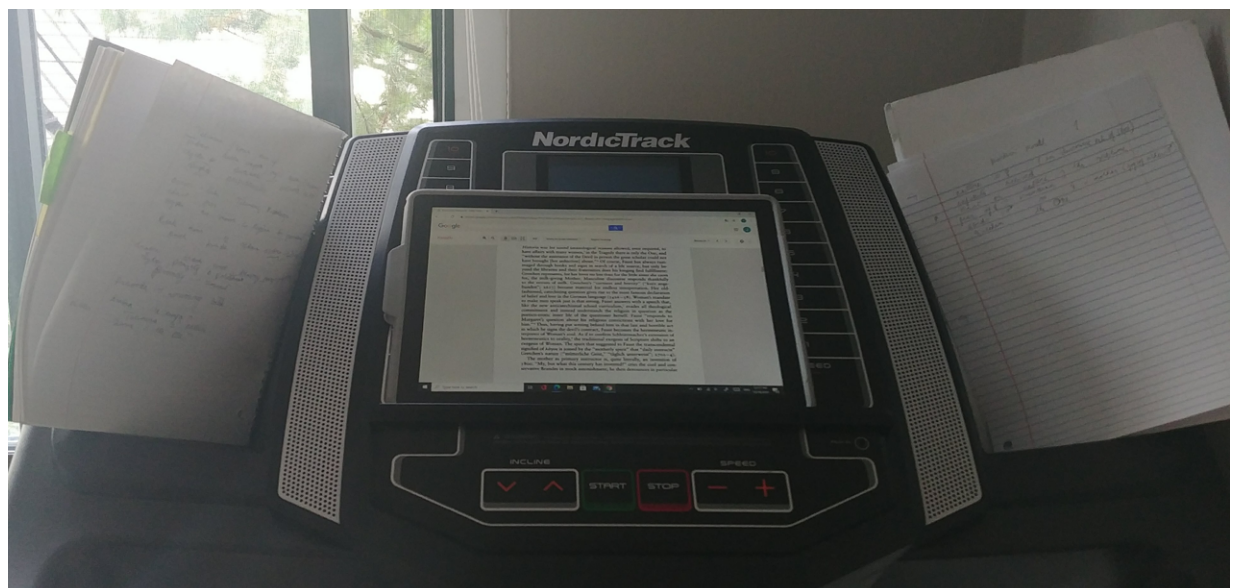
RSV: I see Sibelan mentioned me in her response to this. I'm pretty sure I picked up the idea of comparative translation while I was in Iowa. It was definitely a common practice in the Translation Workshop. Since then, I've used it many times in literature classes. Obviously, it only works with texts that exist in multiple versions, which means they are likely canonical. One that I've used multiple times is taking the first paragraph of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* in, say, five different published versions and going through the choices made by different translators, e.g., “wicked” vs. “spiteful” vs. “angry,” and so on. Another step beyond that is to ask students to make their own version by selecting from the ones we've discussed and then—the key—explain why they've chosen what they've chosen. This can work for any text that has significant variation among versions. Students get it quickly, and by the end of the exercise they often even know the names of the translators. It's very cool to hear students say things like, “I like the

Coulson translation on X, the Pevear and Volokhonsky on Y, and the Garnett on Z.”

FB: If you had a big dream for translation education, or translation in the academy, what would it be?

SF: If all our students knew enough of a second language to do some literary translation themselves, they would learn a TON—so that is my first big dream. At a moment when language and literature (along with many other Humanities disciplines) are being cut or denigrated, engaging with translation really shows students and colleagues why these fields are fascinating as well as important.

SFV: I'd love to see university presses adopt processes for handling rights, payments, subventions, and so on that don't assume every author or translator comes to the press with university funding and a university salary. Now, if viewpoints ever shift and people begin valuing fiction from Central Asia as creative work rather than as a historical or educational resource, publishing those books will shift away from university presses, and the problem might solve itself. But to the extent that we Central Asian translators still rely on university presses, it's an issue.



Jess Jensen Mitchell's treadmill desk, 2022. Photo by Jess Jensen Mitchell.

JJM: As an early-career scholar navigating a hellacious job market, I've read a lot of job listings, and I wish there was a more explicit emphasis on translation in our field. Accomplishments in translation are indicative of language skills, cultural engagement, and an ability to exist in multiple communities—what's not to like? I'm very pleased that several recent hires are respected translators, so there might be a sea change on this.

Translation could anchor the humanities.

RSV: I think translating imparts different skills than learning to speak or read a foreign language well or write analyses of literary works, or non-literary ones for that matter. So my dream would be that it be taught as its own distinctive practice. Translation could anchor the humanities. To do it, people would need to learn a foreign language well, they'd need to learn their "own" language even better, and they'd need to be able to exercise judgment about whether it was worth translating something or not, what might be offensive, harmful, moving, and so on. And they'd need to learn to write effectively on behalf of someone else, create a compelling voice for someone other than themselves. And not leave anything key out, like the things they might not know, or the things they might not agree with. Not ambitious at all, I know.



Fiona Bell is an assistant professor of Russian at the University of Utah. Her scholarship situates nineteenth-century Russian literature in transnational histories of race and sexuality. She writes criticism for venues including *Asymptote*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and the *Rumpus*, and serves as a reviews editor at *Full Stop*. She is currently translating the contemporary Belarusian writer Tatsiana Zamirovskaya and the nineteenth-century Russian writer and editor Avdotya Panaeva. Learn more about her work at fiona-bell.com.



Shelley Fairweather-Vega is a professional translator of Russian and Uzbek in Seattle, Washington, where she runs the Northwest Literary Translators, manages a library consulting business, and serves on the advisory board of the Translation Studies Hub at the University of Washington. Shelley holds degrees in International Relations and Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies. Her translation practice focuses on the contemporary literature of Central Asia. Shelley's translation of Hamid Ismailov's *We Computers: A Ghazal Novel* was a finalist for the 2025 National Book Award for Translated Literature. Read more about her work in progress and publications at fairvega.com/translation.



Sibelan Forrester is the Susan W. Lippincott Professor of Modern and Classical Languages and Russian at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. She has published translations of fiction, poetry, and scholarly prose from Croatian, Russian, Serbian and (of poetry) Ukrainian.



Jess Jensen Mitchell is a translator, writer, and literary scholar. She finished her PhD at Harvard this year; her dissertation centers on representations of the borderland region of Upper Silesia in contemporary Polish literature. Her other academic interests include the role of public intellectuals in interwar Poland, and self-narrations among European diaspora communities in the United States. Her translations and reviews have appeared in *Two Lines*, *Asymptote*, *Hopscotch Translation*, *Full Stop*, and *The Penguin Book of Polish Short Stories*, and she inaugurated *Paraphrasis*, the podcast about translation hosted by the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard. Her first book-length translation—of Jerzy Pilch's unabashedly stylish and bawdy novel *Spis cudzołożnic*—is forthcoming with Open Letter Books. During her upcoming residency at the Polish Book Institute, she will be translating a 1926 novel about hedonism, moral decay, and a world gone to the dogs.



Russell Scott Valentino is a professor in the Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures and the Department of Comparative Literature at Indiana University Bloomington. His work has been published by the *NY Times*, *Reaktion Books*, *The Harvard Review*, Yale University Press, and a dozen other literary magazines and book publishers; and supported by the NEH, the NEA, PEN American, and the U.S. Departments of State and Education. Former Editor-in-Chief at *The Iowa Review* and former President of the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA), Valentino served on the 2022 jury for the National Book Awards. He is the founder and publisher of Autumn Hill Books and blogs at russellv.com. His translation of Miljenko Jergović's family saga *Kin* (Archipelago Books, 2021) received AATSEEL's 2023 Best Prose Translation award. His translation (with Miriam Shrager and Sibelan Forrester) of Vladimir Propp's *Historical Roots of the Wondertale* was published by Indiana University Press in December, 2025.

2026 ASEEEES Board Elections

The elections for the ASEEEES Board of Directors are held annually in the summer.

In 2026, there are three seats up for election: the President-Elect/Vice President, and the two Members-at-Large serving three-year terms from January 1, 2027 to December 31, 2029.

Voting ends
September 1, 2026

VICE PRESIDENT / PRESIDENT-ELECT

- [Melissa Bokovoy](#) – Professor of History and Regents' Lecturer at the University of New Mexico
- [Alison K. Smith](#) – Professor of History at the University of Toronto

MEMBERS AT LARGE

- [Aleksandar Bošković](#) – Senior Lecturer in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian at Columbia University
- [Dima Kortukov](#) – Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Alabama
- [Piotr Kosicki](#) – Associate Professor of History at the University of Maryland
- [Laura Schlosberg](#) – Assistant Dean of Academic and Curriculum Support in the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford University

Members have been sent their ballots via email. If you have questions, please [contact us](#).

ASEEES Distinguished Contributions to Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Award



The 2026 Distinguished Contributions to Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Award, which honors eminent scholars who have made major contributions to the field through scholarship, mentoring, leadership, and service to the profession, is presented to

Frank E. Sysyn

Professor of History and Classics and Director of the Peter Jacyk Centre for Ukrainian Historical Studies at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta

A distinguished and innovative historian of early modern and modern Ukraine, a dedicated builder of institutions, a generous mentor, and a tireless advocate for Ukrainian studies, Dr. Frank E. Sysyn exemplifies the spirit of the ASEEES Distinguished Contributions Award. Over the course of a remarkable career, he has transformed the study of Ukrainian history through pathbreaking scholarship, sustained intellectual leadership, and an extraordinary commitment to building the scholarly communities and institutional structures that allow the field to flourish.

Dr. Sysyn's scholarship has fundamentally reshaped the study of Ukraine and East Central Europe. His landmark monograph, *Between Poland and the Ukraine: The Dilemma of Adam Kysil, 1600–1653* (Harvard University Press, 1985), remains a foundational work in the field, offering a nuanced interpretation of political culture and confessional conflict in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In his numerous articles on topics ranging from the Khmelnytsky Uprising and the Cossack chronicles to religious culture and the concept of nationhood, Dr. Sysyn has developed new ways of understanding the relationships among social conflict, religion, elite culture, and state formation. His work anticipated and helped define the comparative history of East Central Europe, invoking contested identities and regional complexity, and deconstructing simplified national narratives.

Just as significant has been Dr. Sysyn's role in creating the institutional foundations of the field. From his early involvement with the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University to his decades of leadership at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and the Peter Jacyk Centre for Ukrainian Historical Research, he has been central to the emergence of Ukrainian studies as a rigorous, internationally recognized academic field. As editor-in-chief of the English-language edition of Mykhailo Hrushevsky's *History of Ukraine-Rus'*, he led one of the most ambitious collaborative projects in the field, coordinating scholars, translators, and editors across institutions and countries to make this cornerstone of Ukrainian historiography accessible to a global audience. His later work on the writings of Mykhailo Zubrytsky further demonstrated his gift for recovering neglected figures and opening new avenues for research on Ukraine's intellectual, religious, and social history.

Dr. Sysyn's contributions encompass his role in mentoring generations of scholars who consistently describe his mentorship as generous, demanding, and transformative. His teaching and advising have encouraged scholars to place Ukrainian history in broader comparative frameworks and to simultaneously engage Polish, Jewish, Russian, Hungarian, Armenian, and other histories. His influence is visible in the work of the many scholars and institutions he has helped shape across North America, Europe, Australia, and Ukraine. His public-facing work has been equally consequential. Through his leadership in Holodomor studies, especially with the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium, he has helped move the field toward broader comparative and interdisciplinary conversations on famine, empire, colonialism, and genocide, while also strengthening public and educational engagement.

ASEEES is proud to honor Frank E. Sysyn, whose scholarship has changed the field, whose leadership has built it, whose mentoring continues to renew it, and whose public engagement has extended its reach and relevance.



ASEEES 58th Annual Convention



Palmer House Hilton, Chicago – November 12-15, 2026
Virtual Convention – October 16-17, 2026

Theme: States and Empires Spotlight on Balkan Studies

2026 ASEEES President
Oxana Shevel, Tufts University

Important Dates

August 12 – [early-bird registration](#) ends

September 1 – deadline for [ancillary event space requests](#)

September 10 – deadline for [session change requests](#)

October 12 – [registration](#) ends

(subsequent changes may not appear in print program)

Note: The online submission platform closed for session proposals on March 1, but remains open for ancillary event space requests until September 1.

Membership & Registration

All participants who are Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies specialists in the US or abroad must be current ASEEES members to participate in the convention.

[Renew/Purchase Membership](#)

All participants must register. This is in addition to membership dues. The early-bird registration deadline is

Convention Grants

DEADLINE August 31

[Convention Inclusion Travel Grant](#) – open to BA, MA, and PhD students from all backgrounds, regardless of participation in the convention

DEADLINE September 1

[Convention Childcare Grant](#) – up to \$250 to assist members who have childcare costs during the convention.

Please review the [best practices for fostering accessibility and inclusivity](#) at the Annual Convention.

Become a Sponsor!

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ASEEES offers exhibit booths, digital ads, and print ads for exhibitors. [Place your order before August 15 to receive Early Bird Rates.](#)

#ASEEES26

Online Program

View the [online program](#) to see the preliminary schedules for the Annual Convention!

Session Changes

To make changes to your session, use the [Session Change Request Form](#).

Palmer House Hilton

Book your stay early! Use the ASEEES [room link](#) to book at the discounted rate.



NEW FROM SLAVICA PUBLISHERS

Evgeny Sergeev. *Illusory Dawn: Paradoxes of Soviet-British Relations in the Post-Locarno Era, 1925–32*, xx + 276 p. (978-089357-541-0), \$35.95.

Like Sergeev's earlier books on the history of Ruso-(Soviet)-British relations, this volume reconstructs key episodes that influenced the dialogue between Moscow and London. *Illusory Dawn* focuses on internal British political dynamics against the background of international developments in the political, economic, and cultural spheres in the years 1925–32, known as the post-Locarno era. The author meticulously surveys important trends in Soviet-British relations in a number of regions, including Europe and Central and East Asia, illuminating the actions of prominent statesmen, diplomats, military commanders, and public figures who contributed to the establish-

ment of bilateral contacts, even if these contacts were interrupted by sporadic conflicts that made illusory the long-awaited dawn.

Eugeniusz Iwaniec. *History of the Russian Old Believers on Polish Lands*, trans. **Bethany Romashov and Jeffrey D. Holdemann**, xxvi + 288 p. (ISBN 978-089357-473-4), \$34.95.

First published in Polish in 1977, this book created a sensation: after a long silence in People's Poland, the resident Old Believers, with their rich cultural and folklore traditions, were being spoken about publicly as a religious society. The present translation opens a significant chapter of history to a wide English-language audience, including Old Believers in the eastern US, the vast majority of whom are descended from ancestors from Polish lands.



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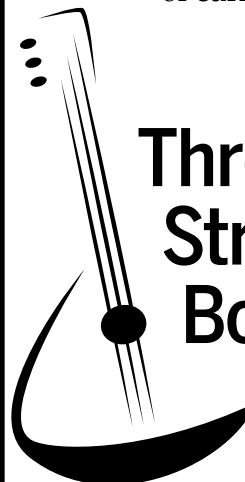


SLAVICA

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.

Julia Nemirovskaya and Anna Krushelnitskaya, eds., *Dislocation: An Anthology of Poetic Response to Russia's War in Ukraine*, xxv + 469 p. (978-089357-524-3), \$44.95.

This collection reflects the developments and effects of the Ukraine War as seen by Russophone poets from all over the world. Divided into thematic clusters, the book delves into the death, despair, displacements, and dislocations brought on by the war, and explores the complexities and conflicts of affiliation with the language and culture of the country ruled by Putin's aggressive and repressive regime. The featured poems were sourced from Kopilka, a repository of current antiwar poetry.



Dobri Voinikov. *The Misunderstood Civilization: A Satirical Play in Five Acts*, trans. **Stoyan Tchapravov**, xviii + 97 p., 2025 (ISBN 978-089357-536-6), \$19.95.

Recipient of a 2023 PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant. "A caustic satire from 1871, Dobri Voinikov's play *The Misunderstood Civilization* is an indictment of the drive to westernize in the years leading up to Bulgaria's independence from the Ottoman Empire. Hadji Kosta, the protagonist of the play and a wealthy shopkeeper, tries to hold his family together as his wife, daughter, and son are each bewitched by flourishes of European decadence from the play's villain Margaridi... The play's commentary on the contradictions of gender roles, the trappings of tradition, and westernization as blind imitation has since made it a staple in Bulgarian theater and film. Stoyan Tchapravov's nimble translation captures Voinikov's sharp-tongued mockery and the heteroglossia of the late Ottoman Bulgaria, breathing new life into a work that remains uneasily relevant to the present." — Judge



Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History
<https://kritika.georgetown.edu>

Kritika is dedicated to critical inquiry into the history of Russia and Eurasia. The quarterly journal features research articles as well as analytical review essays and extensive book reviews, especially of works in languages other than English. Subscriptions and previously published volumes available from Slavica—including, as of 16, no. 1, e-book editions (ePub, PDF). Contact our business manager at slavica@iu.edu for all questions regarding subscriptions and eligibility for discounts.

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Beyond the Ideal

“Failing” into Fulfillment: A Journey to and from Academia

By Zachary Hoffman

Few Slavacists would say they chose this path because they foresaw a lucrative career. The decision to go to graduate school in the humanities is rather more akin to entering a religious order. There’s a vow of poverty and grueling mental labor. Defending a dissertation signifies your ascent to mastership. Research promises a personal relationship with the divine primary sources of your particular sect, confirming your authority to preach historical truths to the laity. There’s even an ordination ceremony where we get to wear robes.

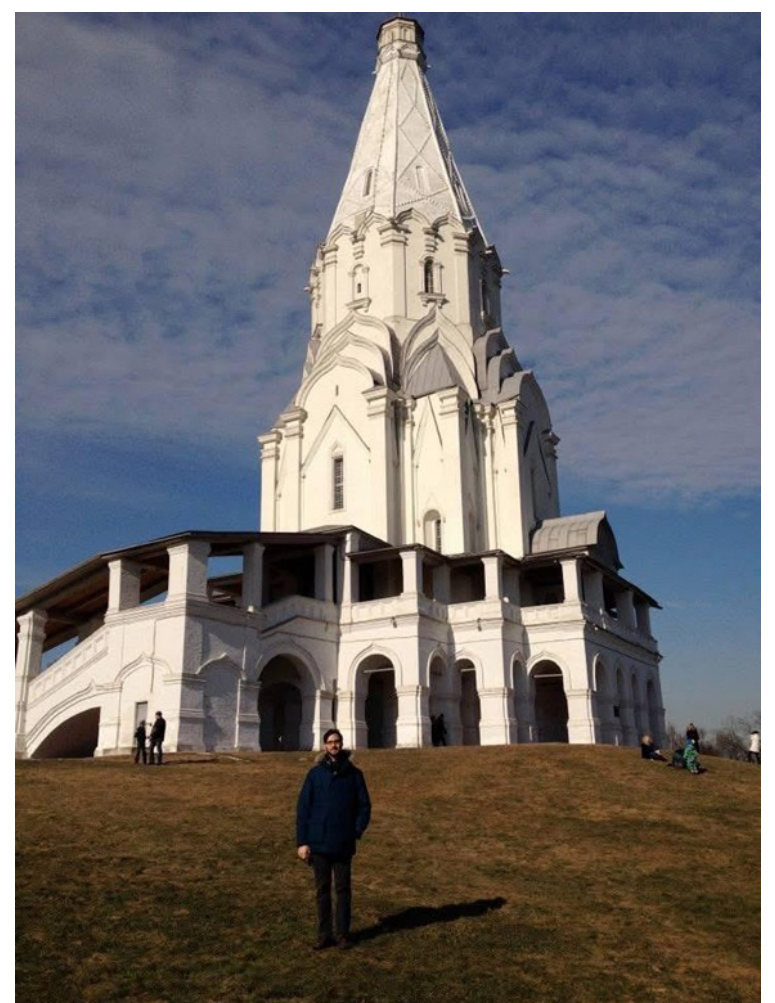
Maybe not everyone takes it that seriously. Still, the feeling of being “part of the academic community” pervaded my training and strongly colored my professional identity. I started this path with the unequivocal goal of a history professorship where I could share the fruits of my tutelage and maybe even continue the great circle of scholarly life by training my own graduate students.

It didn’t work that way for me, though. By the time my post-doctoral fellowship ended in mid-2020, there was little prospect of gainful employment in academia. Five demoralizing churns through the gears of the job market had raised the serious prospect of having to leave higher ed. And so, I made a fateful decision: I would accept the seeming defeat of teaching at a high school.

I began undergraduate study on track to become a secondary history teacher. The gleam of knowledge and professional bookishness led me to abandon this track, however, and I switched to a BA in history in my junior year to pursue my passion for history. Required readings like Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* and lectures on things like the Slavophile Controversy became the highlight of my week. Even through untold levels of anxiety from the heightened essay-

writing load, I felt a powerful satisfaction from working so closely with topics I loved. When contemplating careers, I couldn’t help but imagine myself in a cardigan sweater at the front of a lecture hall, regaling students about palace coups and socialist realism.

The stress and pressure increased dramatically in graduate school, but so did my sense of purpose and burgeoning self-identification as a “professional” historian. As a PhD student, everything positioned me as a professor-in-training. I received little formal instruction in pedagogy, but my teaching assistant duties provided plentiful experience leading a classroom. Months spent in archives in Petersburg and Moscow brought me journeyman credentials and introduced me to a cohort of American historians of Russia. We were all cutting our teeth on projects that would



The author at the Church of the Ascension at Kolomenskoye during his dissertation research in Moscow in 2014.

become dissertations, and then, we all hoped, monographs that would secure tenure. By the time I earned my doctorate, imagining myself professionally as anything other than a professor felt tantamount to failing. The path to professorship seemed difficult, but surely I'd be one of the ones who made it.

After a few tentative runs at the market, I applied to jobs in Fall 2017 with a newly minted PhD and an article pending publication in a top journal in my field. I sat for three video interviews for temporary positions (the most I'd ever get) and chose a post-doctoral fellowship at my home institution, the University of Virginia, that focused on teaching and academic advising. Here, I got to design and teach my own courses, and students even called me Professor Hoffman. The two-year position also afforded the financial stability I'd needed to start a family, offering much-needed perspective on my life and career. It felt like I was almost there. The uncertain future weighed heavily, though, as the academic clock barreled toward the end of my contract.

My history PhD program straightforwardly prepared students for jobs in the professorate, as most do. I worked on my job materials constantly—often to the detriment of my research. My advisor read a dozen versions of my cover letter and wrote at least twice that many recommendations. I didn't want to accept that the odds were poor that I'd succeed. Sure, there were only around ten jobs I was truly qualified for each year, and I didn't have the most impressive list of publications or achievements. And yes, I knew the backlog of fellow un-tenure-tracked PhDs was swelling the number of

applicants for even the smallest colleges. Something was going to stick for me, though.

Nonetheless, I knew I'd have to seriously consider backup plans. Jobs in public history, museums, and publishing existed; however, those trajectories remained inchoate to me and likely required additional training. In the late 2010s, I made some headway pursuing the digital humanities, but a lack of coding skills, together with my fellowship's teaching and advisorial responsibilities, made me feel similarly stymied. As most NewsNet readers will know, mentioning you study Russia often prompts people to suggest you get "a job with the government." I considered the various things this might mean, but my scholarly instincts (and the USAJobs portal) told me this was not an immediately viable option either. Adjuncting of course existed too, but prospects were far-flung and not conducive to supporting a family. Through all of this, I did not consider high school teaching.

The academic job market fell more or less precipitously throughout the 2010s. Every year seemed the bottom, from which the upward trend would finally begin. 2020 showed these were all false floors, and the true abyss lay far below. After a final demoralizing and fruitless run at the market, my postdoc was bookended by the COVID-19 lockdown. Unease turned to panic. Hiring and funding freezes spelled a dead end to my chances of staying at my home institution. I needed full-time employment for the 2020-2021 school year, but academia didn't seem forthcoming.

Several of my graduate school colleagues had made the transition to secondary teaching. In March

2020, we had actually visited two close friends in Atlanta who both taught at private high schools. One of them graciously offered to let me tour their school, sit in on a class, and meet with their division director. It had been decades since I'd been in a secondary classroom, but the topic (the Haitian Revolution) was familiar to me, and the depth with which the class covered the material was greater than I might have expected. This is not to say I thought it would be facile or surface-level, but a decade in the university world had strongly colored my assumptions of what high school courses and students were like. Meeting with the division director offered similar insights. My expertise and knowledge in history would be valued in this setting, but I would need to learn how to teach high school. I should not expect a secondary school to simply see my degree and university teaching experience and jump at the chance to have me. Barely 24 hours after this foray outside of my professional domain, my university announced class cancellations and virtual teaching for the foreseeable future.

Applying for secondary school jobs was both easier and more difficult than the academic rat race. Applications made familiar requests (CV/resume, cover letter, transcripts), but necessitated reframing my credentials. In higher ed, even postings for teaching-centric jobs at liberal arts colleges demanded assertive research agendas and timelines. After five years on the job market, I had a stale professional statement that was heavy on research and light on teaching. I learned early on, however, that research would likely never be a top priority for a secondary school employer. It was certainly value-



A shelf in the author's current classroom. Photo by Zachary Hoffman.

added, but in the game of high school education, it was tertiary. All the same, moving publications and conference presentations to the end of my credentials meant ignoring powerful instincts. Reframing my qualifications did, however, offer a chance to reflect on my career to that point. Between serving as a grader or teaching assistant and running my own courses, I had spent a large part of the past decade teaching. My adventures and accomplishments in research were important, but when I really thought about it, I viewed myself fundamentally as an educator. This was not exactly a revelation. I'd always found teaching enjoyable and rewarding, and when I envisioned myself as a professor, it was almost always in front of a classroom.

From the outset, my understanding of private schools was doubly opaque. I'd had a public school education and so lacked any firsthand experience. My single-minded focus on staying in the ivory tower had also prevented me from learning much about them

while job-hunting. (For example, I kept calling them "private," only to learn they were more professionally referred to as "independent" schools.) They seemed to offer some advantages to me regarding a possible transition out of academia, though. For one, many do not require a teaching license. I had a master's and a doctorate in history, but I lacked any degree in education. In my state, this meant I'd need to take a training program and an exam. My experiences visiting independent schools and conversations with friends and family showed that they aligned with my teaching experience and style. Classes are usually smaller and more intimate. Teachers have greater flexibility over their curricula. Many straightforwardly label themselves "college preparatory" academies. I began to think maybe this wouldn't be as violent a course change as I'd feared.

I interviewed for secondary teaching jobs later that Spring and accepted a position at a mid-sized independent school for Fall 2020. I would be

teaching European and Asian history and helping out with a new student-advising program. A major selling point had been the chance to teach the seniors Advanced Placement European History. This was essentially a version of the Western Civilization course I'd taught many times. It was also a personal favorite from my own high school years. Over many, many Zoom calls (it was still the pandemic), I got to meet the faculty and get a feel for the school.

The week of meetings before the beginning of classes drove home the very real differences between college and secondary teaching. Many are glaringly obvious or mundane, but critical to navigating the transition. Foremost, you see the students far more frequently than in college courses. This means not only a dramatic increase in lesson planning, but also much more, and more consistent, grading and gradebook wrangling. As much as I longed to, I could not give two tests and a paper per semester and be done. For one thing, the students need more direct engagement and scaffolding, which means daily assignments to check their progress and establish a baseline grade. And then there are the aspects of high school teaching almost wholly absent from college. You are in more contact with fellow educators about individual students at grade-level and faculty meetings, to say nothing of parent-teacher conferences twice a year. The students are also younger, and discipline is not merely a passing concern in the classroom. In other words, teaching is your full-time job. Again, obvious, but a major change from what I was used to.

My first year at an independent school was difficult. Previous teachers had left guideposts and course maps, but it was up to me to figure out how

to make it all hang together. While I could more or less directly adapt Western Civ and Russian History materials to AP European History, courses for underclassmen required a lot more work. Daily planning was demanding and relentless. It didn't help that I stubbornly insisted on changing my teaching style as little as possible. It seems silly and pompous now, but at the time, it felt really important to be a college professor who was teaching high school. This was mentally very challenging.

Leaving the college teaching track had caused a crisis in my professional identity. The majority of my adult life has been dedicated to advanced degrees and postdocs chasing my vision of professorhood. I'd spent years obsessively checking job postings and refreshing my email in hopes of news that would secure my place there. Now I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd failed out. It wasn't easy to let go of something that felt like a personal as well as a professional identity.

As it turned out, I didn't actually have to let it go. It just took some time to get over myself. After five years, my personal and professional identity are much more harmonious than I might have imagined. I still miss some of the monastic trappings of scholarly life, but teaching at a high school provides ample academic fulfillment. My colleagues offer an intellectually stimulating environment where I'm equally comfortable asking advice on a lesson or making a bad joke about Stalin or Brezhnev. Despite my misplaced fears about "stepping down" from college teaching, colleagues and students value my excessive content knowledge. I get to indulge my curiosity regularly while lesson planning. Recently, this meant reading about Buddhism in Central

Asia and perusing propaganda posters from Eurasian communist regimes. The pace and regularity of the work were an adjustment, but ultimately proved more conducive to work-life balance. I still occasionally attend conferences and do some writing over the summers. Being able to send my kids to my school, as well as call on colleagues or substitute teachers, has made dealing with the exigencies intrinsic to raising them easier to deal with as well.

The biggest surprise, however, was the students themselves. Their enthusiasm and genuine desire to learn are energizing. While they are, of course, teenagers and subject to any number of social and emotional foibles, I can't count how many times they've led class down interesting tangents I wouldn't have otherwise considered. They love a good story as much as I do and are (almost) always up for anecdotes about Peter the Great's height or antics during his Grand Embassy. They're surprised to find out that they call me "Doctor" Hoffman because I have a doctorate in history. As expected, I have to coach most of them more closely on writing and argumentation than I did in college courses. All the same, every year I get some ninth-graders who can write as well as or better than college freshmen.

When I took a job teaching at a secondary school, I felt the need to email advisors and faculty members I'd worked with over the years to explain myself and my decision. I had relied on them heavily to get to my PhD, and they all responded with sorely-needed support and reassurance. One of them said something I still think about years later. Teaching at a high school is fulfilling a critical role in preparing students to succeed in

college. I wasn't leaving academia so much as teaching the same students at a different stage.

My journey didn't go the way I envisioned, but I'm still engaging with and sharing my love of history every day. Even if I'm not "Professor Hoffman," I get to do almost everything I wanted to do in academia.



Zachary Hoffman is a history teacher in the upper division of Highland School in Warrenton, Virginia. He holds a PhD in Modern European History from the University of Virginia. His research has focused on the popular press in Imperial Russia and national identities during the Boxer Uprising and Russo-Japanese War.

Introducing the

ASEEES Cohort Project

The **ASEEES Cohort Project** brings together first- and second-year doctoral students from across the field for a yearlong series of structured sessions covering a range of topics central to succeeding in graduate school, from crafting a strong CV to writing effective grant proposals.

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ASEEES First Book Subvention Program

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The ASEEES First Book Subvention Program awards up to \$2500 for subvention of books by first-time authors.

SHERA Member Spotlight: Karla Huebner

In 2025, the Society of Historians of East European, Eurasian, and Russian Art and Architecture (SHERA) celebrated its 30th anniversary. The society brings together scholars specializing in the art and architecture of this expansive region from ancient times to the present day. SHERA creates a sense of community for scholars around the world, serving as a vibrant source of information and exchange.

In this and coming issues of *NewsNet*, SHERA will present interviews with members who are also part of ASEES to give a sense of our diverse community. This month, we offer an interview with Karla Huebner, a specialist in the Czech avant-garde of the early 20th century and a successful writer of literary fiction.

— Margaret Samu (Parsons School of Design)

Margaret Samu: How did you develop an interest in Czech art?

Karla Huebner: Art has been a big part of my life as long as I can remember—I was one of those kids who drew and painted constantly, and loved going to museums. So it's not too surprising that I eventually became an art historian. My interest in Czechoslovakia also began early, because at the end of World War II, my father's unit was sent to western Bohemia, where he became friends with a Czech family and stayed in touch with them. We'd visit every few years, which was something of an adventure during the Communist period, and I grew up considering them as extended family. This personal connection made it natural to take an interest in all things Czechoslovak.

MS: What was it like to pursue that specialty in graduate school? How did you find mentors to support your studies?

I began graduate school in midlife, so I'd had time to develop many interests and had begun to write about art. For the MA, which I did at American University, specialization was merely a matter of choosing Modern Europe rather than Renaissance or American art. When I decided to go beyond the MA to pursue a PhD at University of Pittsburgh, I could have enjoyed specializing in quite a few different areas of art history, but as my new advisor, Barbara McCloskey—who I met at a graduate art history conference—was a Weimar German specialist, we initially supposed I would work on a Weimar

German topic. However, we weren't coming up with anything that grabbed us—there'd been a lot of recent dissertations on Weimar German art—so she soon asked me if I might be able to write a dissertation on those Czech surrealists that I had discovered via Whitney Chadwick's groundbreaking *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*. I replied that if Barbara didn't mind that I'd need to get my Czech into better shape—I hadn't had an opportunity to



Toyen's *Deserted Den/The Abandoned Burrow* (1937). This image is reproduced under fair use for informational and educational purposes in an academic context.

use it in at least ten years—I would be delighted to work on Czech surrealism. My dissertation focus became the gender-nonconforming artist Toyen, a founding member of the Prague surrealist group.

Fortunately, as ASEES members are aware, the University of Pittsburgh has a strong Slavic program and a Center for Russian, East European, & Eurasian Studies. That meant there was general support in terms of area studies and FLAS fellowships. Granted, Pitt offered Slovak language rather than Czech, but as the two languages are quite similar and I had already heard a lot of Czech and taken a year of Czech language as a non-degree student at UC Berkeley, the late Martin Votruba kindly tutored me and allowed me to speak Czech in his Slovak class. It was fun to discover both how Czech and Slovak differ and how they are more or less the same. Another faculty supporter was Helena Goscilo, who was teaching at Pitt at that time. I had taken her co-taught course on Russian art, so she agreed to be on my dissertation committee along with Barbara and two other art historians, the Americanist Kirk Savage and the contemporary specialist Terry Smith. All of my committee members were very supportive of my project. The fact that I was already accustomed to doing research, and felt fairly confident about the direction to take, eased the way for faculty members unfamiliar with Czech studies to guide me forward.

I was also fortunate in receiving good financial support throughout my graduate studies, including (among others) FLAS, Andrew Mellon Predoctoral, and Fulbright-Hays. As a result, I was able to take Czech summer language courses in Prague, after which I lived in the city for two years while doing archival, library, and museum research. During my stay, the Czech Fulbright office was very helpful and I remain in touch with its staff



Toyen's Factory (1920). This image is reproduced under fair use for informational and educational purposes in an academic context.

and with friends made through the Fulbright program. Czech librarians and archivists were also helpful—showing persistence in my research proved key to gaining their support. Overall, I was one of those peculiar people who thoroughly enjoyed graduate school and felt well supported by faculty, staff, and fellow grad students. As a writer who had done a lot of scholarly research prior to returning to school, for me grad school was a form of paradise—interesting courses, financial support, and the time to dig into my research.

MS: How have your research interests evolved since then?

I wish I could say that my research interests have evolved in all sorts of exciting new ways since grad school. However, I pursued my dissertation research in ways that made my work on interwar Czech culture easy to develop further. First of all, after a dissertation (now book) that looked at the artist Toyen as an important member of the interwar Czech avant-garde, I've remained interested in

interdisciplinary cultural networks. The dissertation also emphasized other aspects of Toyen's context, in particular delving into the history of women, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, my extensive use of interwar Czechoslovak periodicals made expansion into periodical studies and visual culture a natural choice.

It was very fortunate that my graduate work provided such a broad basis for future investigations, as once I was hired at Wright State University, I did not have much time to plan new research. It wasn't hard for me to come up with conference papers, book chapters, and short articles, but I was not in a good position to embark on ambitious new projects. This is a common situation for early-career scholars—in my case, as one of two art historians (and almost immediately the senior one), I initially thought I'd have my course preps in good shape after about three years, but the situation at the university and in my department ultimately necessitated reorganizing the art history program,

and there were many years of constantly adjusting my courses to fit what seemed like ever-shifting time slots (first twice weekly on a quarter system, then thrice, twice, and once weekly on semesters). Again, while my exact situation might not have been commonplace, early-career scholars are often beset with unexpected chores and responsibilities that take time from completing books or launching new research projects!

Therefore, for grad students reading this interview, I recommend laying as good a research foundation as possible during the dissertation years, because there is no way to predict what kind of job you will get and whether it (or your personal life) will leave room for a career as an active scholar. You may be hired at a school that has a four-four courseload and requires a great deal of service, or on the other hand your family life may take a difficult turn.

I was lucky in that my departmental colleagues were generally supportive and my students tended to be nice people, but we had only a handful of Art History majors at any time (in fact, the Art History major was scrapped after I retired due to faculty cuts) and Wright State had no Slavic program (Russian language instruction was discontinued about ten years ago along with Italian and Japanese). During my years at Wright State, I mainly taught courses in European and North American art between about 1700 and 1970, and my students were almost all studio art majors. Only occasionally was I in a position to teach a course such as Czech Modernism. In other words, while my students appreciated the exposure to Russian and East Central European art that I included in my European courses, and several of my students were able to present their Czech-focused papers at Midwest Slavic, there was no real opportunity

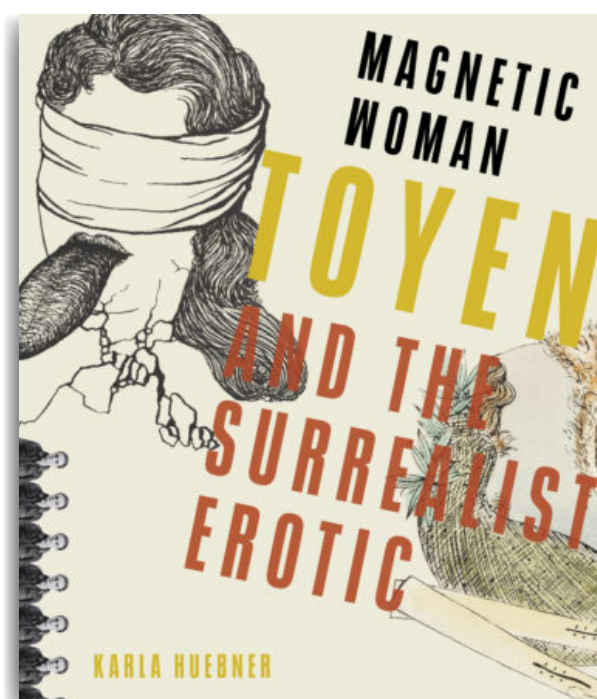
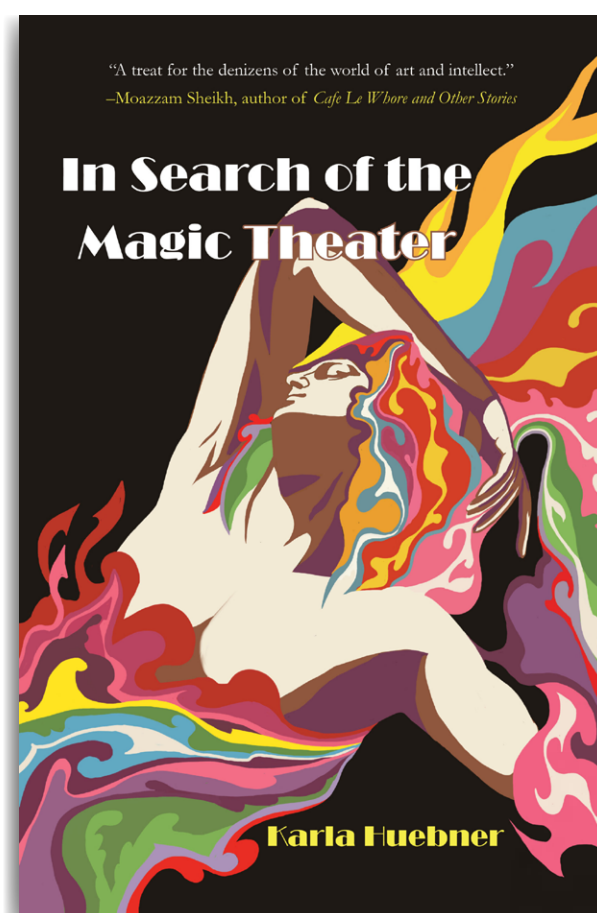
to supervise more advanced work and directly encourage a new generation of scholars to work on East Central Europe. This was disappointing, but not an unusual situation. I've been grateful for all that was good about my teaching career!

MS: What role have SHERA and ASEEEES played in your career?

SHERA and ASEEEES have been a great help in keeping me connected to the wider intellectual world during my years of teaching undergraduates the basics of Western art history. The same is true of the Czechoslovak Studies Association and other scholarly organizations I have belonged to over the years. Being able to attend ASEEEES each year has encouraged me to learn more about Russian and Ukrainian art, plus I always venture into the audience for talks on linguistics, anthropology, agriculture, film, music, industry, and history of all sorts—that's a huge treat! It has also been a joy to see SHERA grow and mature as an organization supporting art and architectural historians whose research involves East Central Europe and/or the geographic regions associated with the Russian Empire and former USSR.

MS: When did you start writing and publishing fiction?

I chose to be a writer when I was eleven, and I have been publishing fiction since 1983, which is to say soon after finishing my BA in Theatre Arts. Early on, I wrote short, mostly magical realist, fiction that appeared in small literary and genre publications; these days I am primarily a novelist. At present I have two novels out under my own name as well as a humorous campus mystery under the pen name Colette Tajemna.



Karla Huebner has published scholarly monographs, including *Magnetic Woman: Toyen and the Surrealist Erotic* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), as well as novels such as *In Search of the Magic Theater* (Regal House, 2022).

MS: Do you see your literary career as an evolution of your scholarly work, or as a completely new direction?

Fiction is my vocation, it's just not what has earned me a living. Being a scholar is an engrossing hobby that ended up earning me a living.

MS: What are you working on now?

I've got quite a few projects underway. They're presently on a slight hiatus as I've been dealing with my mother's last illness and settling her estate, but to begin with, there are a couple of scholarly items to mention. First, in August I'll be giving a talk on the Czech caricaturist Adolf Hoffmeister and his links to surrealism. That will be in Glasgow at the annual conference of the International Society for the Study of Surrealism. Also of interest to ASEES members, I've gradually been working on a giant anthology of Czech modernist writings on art, aesthetics, and visual culture. The pieces I want to include in the anthology have already been translated by others, but are mostly not easy to find, and some of the translations need revision, while everything needs annotation to be useful for a broad academic audience. I've proposed this anthology to several presses but have not yet found the right publisher. Literarily, I have several novels and a story collection currently under submission to publishers. Other novels are underway or in the planning stages. For example, works in progress include a collaborative novel about Fulbrighters in the Czech Republic and also a novel inspired by an ASEES paper given by Olga Peters Hasty on the pseudonymous Russian poet Cherubina de Gabriak. Life as a scholar, in other words, does at times provide ideas for fiction!



Karla Huebner received her Ph.D. in the History of Art and Architecture from the University of Pittsburgh and her M.A. from American University. She is currently Professor Emerita of Art History at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. Her research areas include surrealism, Czech modernism and visual culture 1890-1950, women artists, the history of gender and sexuality, and periodical studies. In 2020 she published a scholarly monograph, *Magnetic Woman: Toyen and the Surrealist Erotic* (University of Pittsburgh Press). Her work also appears in such journals as *Aspasia*, *Contemporaneity*, *Journal of Women's History*, and *Papers of Surrealism*, as well as volumes of collected essays. Karla's short fiction appears in many literary and genre periodicals, while her novels include *In Search of the Magic Theater* (Regal House, 2022), *Too Early to Know Who's Winning* (Black Rose, 2023), and *The Corpse in the Trash Room* (Archelaus, 2024, writing as Colette Tajemna). Some of Karla's talks are on YouTube; she can also be found on Instagram and Facebook.



Margaret Samu works on art and design of the Russian Empire in a global context. Her book *Russian Venus: The Female Nude in Art and Culture of the Imperial Era*, will be published by Yale University Press in 2028. Margaret's work has appeared in *The Art Bulletin*, *Iskusstvoznanie*, *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, *Vivliofika*, *Experiment*, and a volume she co-edited, *From Realism to the Silver Age* (NIU Press, 2014). She has received grants from the Mellon Foundation, the Fulbright Program, the Library of Congress, and the American Philosophical Society, among other institutions. Margaret served as president of SHERA from 2013 until 2015, and she currently co-organizes the art history section of the 19v Working Group on culture of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. Based in New York City, she teaches at Parsons School of Design and lectures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

2026 ASEEES Grants & Fellowships

Skylar Clark

(Communication Studies,
Northwestern University)

“From Rhetoric to Rule: Anti-Gender Politics, Illiberal Governance, and Counterpublic Contestation in Post-1989 Poland”



This dissertation examines how anti-gender politics has emerged as a strategic rhetorical formation in Poland’s post-1989 public sphere, one that organizes political imagination about what democracy ought to look like, and who it is for. Rather than treating anti-gender discourse as a simple backlash or a predictable symptom of democratic erosion, the project argues that it functions as an infrastructural technology of governance that reorganizes democratic life from within, systematically narrowing the imaginative and institutional terrain through which democratic futures are made possible at all. Drawing on a layered feminist rhetorical methodology that combines genealogical, discursive, affective, and counterpublic analysis, the project traces how “gender ideology” accumulates moral urgency within Poland’s historical terrain, shaped by collective memory, Catholic authority, and the unresolved tensions of post-communist transformation. Anti-gender discourse is approached not as a coherent doctrine but as a coalitional formation that condenses disparate grievances into a unified antagonism, whose strategic vagueness makes it especially powerful in populist contexts. The “phantasm of gender,” as Judith Butler theorizes it, does not dissipate but becomes infrastructural, shaping how democratic institutions classify, regulate, and discipline gendered life. Yet the dissertation attends equally to what contests this foreclosure. Polish feminist and queer counterpublic practices, including protest symbolism, music, poetry, zines, and coalition-building, are analyzed not merely as activism but as rhetorical technologies of imagination that intervene where fact-based persuasion alone no longer penetrates entrenched epistemic and political worldviews. These practices cultivate what Ewa Majewska calls “counterpublics of the common”: spaces sustained through affective labor, creative practice, and relational ethics, oriented not only toward resistance but toward care, survival, and collective possibility. Ultimately, I ask what it means to reclaim democratic imagination under conditions designed to foreclose it, and what forms of solidarity become possible when politics is framed not only as war, but as care.

Dissertation Research Grant Recipients

Zeynep Selcen Boztepe

(Anthropology, Rice University)

Maya K. Peterson Research Grant in Environmental Studies

“Thinking Through Peace and Honey at the Armenia-Turkey Borderland”



This dissertation focuses on the agricultural bioeconomy of apiculture along the Armenia-Turkey borderland, a historical region in the South Caucasus where honey has been produced and consumed for centuries. However, since 1922, the border has been sealed in its current form, with no passage allowed. Despite occasional diplomatic gestures, the expansive Caucasian steppe plains that straddle this frontier remain sealed due to Turkey’s influence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its long-standing denial of the Armenian Genocide (1915–1918). This situation has led to restricted mobility and heightened socio-economic marginalization, particularly in border provinces such as Kars and Armavir. Shared pastures are tightly regulated, and Turkey only recently cleared the minefields that once scarred the landscape. In a region where even a cow can be detained and subject to scrutiny, honeybees remain unregulated travelers. Beekeepers care for their bees as they navigate different local realities and the border line itself. Despite the constraints placed on humans, honeybees freely roam the borderland, supporting other pollination economies and producing a uniquely local honey that reflects an unregulated, transboundary ecology. My work asks if caring for bees, and thus caring for the landscape, designs (creates?) infrastructures and methods of promoting post-conflict security through environmental relations.

Stephanie Dvareckas

(Art History, Rutgers,
The State University of New Jersey)

James Bailey Dissertation Research Grant in Folklore Studies

“The Space Between: Kazakh and Kyrgyz Art from the Late Soviet Period to Independence”

“The Space Between” examines how artists in the Kazakh and Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republics navigated Soviet cultural policy while drawing on material and oral traditions to develop distinctive artistic practices. Focusing on the mid-to-late Soviet period (1958–1978) and set against campaigns of sedentarization and Russification, the study shows how artists negotiated pressures to assimilate by drawing on folklore to produce regionally specific artistic forms. It considers how handicrafts were incorporated into modern artistic practices, particularly how artists negotiated tensions between handmade works and mechanized production. Examining the influence of colonial visual tropes and the impact of environmental movements in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods on representations of landscape, the dissertation argues that artists transformed inherited frameworks into locally grounded modernist forms.



Eliza Frenkel

(Anthropology, Indiana University)

Dissertation Research Grant in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

“Carrying Worlds: Refugee Women's Objects and the Politics of Value in Eastern Europe”

This dissertation explores how refugee women from Ukraine and Belarus rebuild everyday life in Poland through the objects they carry, leave behind, digitize, and transform in exile. Situated at the intersection of material culture and visual anthropology, the project examines how value, memory, and survival are organized through ordinary things and language under conditions of war, political repression, and forced displacement. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Poland, it traces how women assign value to belongings and navigate language as a practical and moral terrain. I conceptualize these object-language assemblages as vernacular archives of order: everyday material and linguistic practices through which continuity is reassembled when institutions, documentation, and futures become unstable. Combining ethnography with feminist sensory visual anthropology, including documentary filmmaking, the dissertation approaches objects not as detached artifacts but as living elements of social worlds, encountered through gesture, narration, and use. In doing so, it shows that forced displacement is lived not only through movement across borders, but through the material and linguistic labor of sustaining life, memory, and future-making in exile.

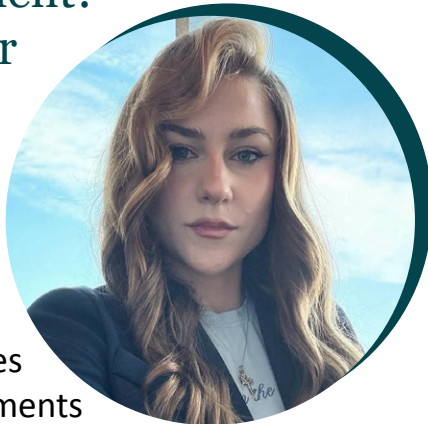


Larysa Haivoronska

(Political Science, Temple University)

“How Does Ongoing Conflict Affect Foreign Direct Investment? A Study of Russian War Against Ukraine (2022–2026)”

This dissertation investigates a striking paradox in international political economy: why foreign companies maintain or even expand investments in a country experiencing active military conflict. Drawing on the unprecedented case of Ukraine, where foreign direct investment rebounded to \$4.57 billion in 2023 despite Europe’s largest conventional war since World War II, the project develops a multi-level theoretical framework that examines investment behavior across geopolitical, state, sub-national, sectoral, and firm-level dimensions. Using a mixed-methods design that combines elite interviews with corporate executives in Ukraine, the US, and Europe; analysis of American Chamber of Commerce and National Bank of Ukraine survey data; and quantitative regression analysis of FDI flows as well as investment deals and projects data, the research tests seven hypotheses. They investigate how such factors as military aid signaling, geographic proximity to conflict, asset specificity, and political risk insurance shape wartime investment decisions. Supported by an ASEEES Dissertation Research Grant, this work contributes to international political economy scholarship while offering practical insights for policymakers seeking to sustain economic resilience during armed conflict. These are lessons of growing relevance as geopolitical tensions intensify worldwide.



Dulat Ilyassov

(Anthropology, Indiana University Bloomington)

“Queers as Producers: Labor, Space, and Comparative Urban Ethnography in Post-Soviet Central Asia”

This project examines the social production of queer spaces in post-socialist Central Asia through a comparative urban ethnography of Almaty (Kazakhstan) and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). It investigates how sexuality, labor, and urban space are co-constituted under conditions of post-Soviet capitalist transformation. As Central Asian societies transition from state socialism to uneven forms of neoliberal capitalism, queer life is reshaped by shifting regimes of property, labor, and governance.



Megija Milberga

(Fine Arts, New York University)

“Insurgent Landscapes: Architecture and the Environment in the Soviet Baltics”

This dissertation explores for the first time how the natural environment, and specifically the landscape, figured in architecture across the Soviet Baltics to think through a series of questions. What does it mean for an architect to choose to follow the contours of a hill rather than flatten it? What political and cultural significance accrues when a building opens toward the sea on a shoreline previously closed to the public? And how do these gestures reveal alternative ways of inhabiting and understanding space? My dissertation argues that site-conscious architectural practices offer a critical lens for examining human-environment relations in the Soviet-era Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania). Working between four landscape conditions and tropes – the sea, the forest, the hill, and the soil – I set out to probe architecture’s role in mediating the dialectic between imposed system and situated knowledge, and produce the first ecocritical reading of Soviet architectural history, examining how built form both responded to environmental conditions and actively shaped their cultural meanings.



Dafina Nedelcheva

(History, Stony Brook University)

“Liberation and Its Discontents: Gender, Monumentality, and the Layered Afterlives of Empire in Post-Socialist Bulgaria”

This dissertation investigates the enduring political power of imperial narratives in Eastern Europe through the contested memory of Russia as Bulgaria’s historical “liberator.” The study focuses on Soviet monuments as infrastructures of layered coloniality through which imperial narratives of liberation have been institutionalized, visually encoded, and repeatedly reactivated in political culture. Its core case study is the Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship in Varna. Built in 1978, the monument fuses Russia’s nineteenth-century role in the liberation from Ottoman rule with the Soviet narrative of antifascist victory, creating a powerful representation of the trope of the “double liberator.” Since the collapse of socialism, the monument has oscillated between neglect and political reactivation, illustrating how the “liberation” narrative persists in ongoing debates over memory, identity, and geopolitical belonging. This research seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which historical narratives continue to structure political belonging in post-socialist societies. The Bulgarian case offers a particularly revealing example of how imperial afterlives persist, demonstrating that monuments function not merely as commemorative objects but as enduring infrastructures through which geopolitical identities and historical narratives are reproduced. Methodologically, the project combines archival and historical contextualization with visual and spatial analysis, treating the monument as a material–semiotic text and form of colonial pedagogy. By reframing Soviet monuments as colonial memory infrastructures, the dissertation advances a decolonial historical perspective on post-Soviet spaces and foregrounds gendered affect as a key mechanism through which imperial hierarchies are reproduced in the present.



Bakir Ovcina

(History, Vanderbilt University)

Alfred J. Rieber Dissertation Research Grant in History

“The Drink and the Double Eagles: Alcohol Production and Consumption in Bosnia and Herzegovina between the Habsburg Empire and Interwar Yugoslavia (1878-1941)”

This dissertation explores alcohol as a window into political and social change in Bosnia between 1878 and 1941, spanning the transition from Habsburg imperial rule to the interwar Yugoslav ‘nation-state.’ At its core lies ‘rakija,’ a fruit brandy deeply embedded in daily life that remained constant even as empires collapsed, borders shifted, and political identities were remade. The project asks how alcohol production, regulation, and consumption changed during the transition - and what those shifts reveal about the relationship between states and societies. How did governments attempt to regulate a substance so tightly woven into daily life? What happened when imperial and national authorities sought to tax, reform, or restrict locally-embedded social practices? I posit that the social and environmental world surrounding alcohol often proved more durable than the political regimes themselves. Orchards, brandy stills, and drinking customs persisted amid dramatic political upheaval, complicating efforts by both the Habsburg and Yugoslav authorities to influence daily life. Alcohol offers a simple, yet revealing lens through which to examine continuities and ruptures in modern Eastern European history. Drawing on archival sources in German and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, the dissertation follows alcohol across its full lifecycle - from cultivation and distillation, through state laws and license systems, temperance activism and public health campaigns. In doing so, it places Bosnia’s diverse communities and overlapping imperial legacies at the center of larger conversations about modernization, governance, ideologies, and social change. Although the Habsburg and Yugoslav states disappeared, alcohol remains central to Bosnian social life. Orchards still dot the countryside, and debates around regulation and public health persist. By tracing the history of an ordinary, yet potent substance, the project demonstrates how everyday practices illuminate the contours and limits of political transformations, while also showing how people navigated those very transformations.

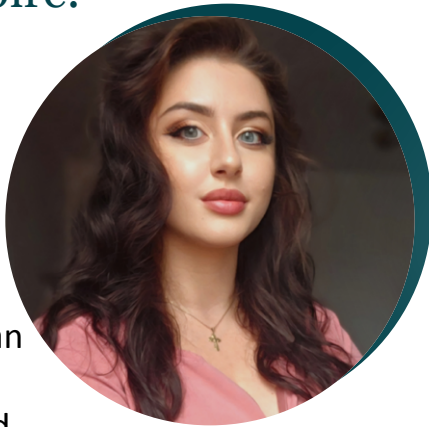


Monika Pendurkova

(History, Indiana University Bloomington)

“In the Backyard of Empire: Second World Women’s Activism and Solidarity before the “Decade of Women”, (1953-1968)”

This dissertation aims to uncover the connections between Bulgarian and Cuban socialist women’s activists that had been established and cultivated years before the first UN conference on the status of women, which coincided with the 1975 International Women’s Year. These connections predated the official diplomatic visits that bounded countries based on a shared socialist future or revolutionary origin. With a focus on soft power actions rather than high politics alone, I show that smaller “Second World” states like Bulgaria established ties with Cuba that preceded the Cuban Revolution and notions of socialist solidarity, long before the thaw of the 1970s. As Maria Cristina Galmarini’s work on blind activism in the Cold War argues, international blind advocacy engaged with “non-Western ideas and visions” and “decenter[ed] Soviet hegemony” for a set of more “diverse global engagements and priorities.” Socialist activists acted as both ambassadors for the project of socialist internationalism and as activists for their respective constituents, exchanging practical knowledge and technologies. My intervention expands on these contributions by shifting focus to transnational socialist interactions between peer states for the preceding two decades before the global decade of the 1970s by examining soft power actions. I pose the following questions: (1) How did Bulgarian women seek alternative connections with other state socialist women within an inter-imperial framework? (2) What new understandings of Cold War internationalisms emerge when we look at earlier forms of socialist women’s solidarity? (3) How did transnational interactions between peer socialist states circulate in “ways that sometimes-confirmed political hierarchies and at other times challenged them”?



Anna Popovych

(Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Dissertation Research Grant in Ukrainian Studies

“Making Sense of War: Cultural Dynamics in Wartime Social Space”

This three-paper dissertation examines the war in Ukraine to understand the wartime cognitive and affective trajectories underlying war’s macro-level socio-demographic and political effects. The first chapter develops a framework for integrating cultural schemas into research on wartime fertility. It shows how wartime uncertainty interacts with reproductive schemas entrenched in Ukrainian society, producing forms of fertility reasoning that nuance and extend quantitative scholarship on war’s demographic impacts. The second paper reframes the concept of “deservingness” in migration research, highlighting the overlooked pressures on Ukrainian war migrants arising from perceived attitudes of the sending community, shaped by wartime solidarity discourses. The third project - funded by the ASEEES Dissertation Research Grant - examines how different interactional contexts of prosthetic treatment shape war veterans’ recovery processes and social identities. It involves ethnographic research at prosthetic centers in the U.S. and Ukraine that provide post-amputation care to Ukrainian veterans injured in the war.



Alexandr Shtumpf

(History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

“Managed Exploitation and Cultured Recreation: Hunting and Environmental Imaginaries in the Late Soviet Kazakhstan”

This project examines hunting in late Soviet Kazakhstan as a site where state governance, social practice, and environmental knowledge intersected.

By focusing on hunting infrastructure in the Kazakh SSR during the period from the late 1950s through the early 1980s, including hunting collectives, licensing systems, and game management institutions, it investigates how the state and society negotiated formal and informal aspects of the Soviet economy and how this negotiation shaped late Soviet environmental imaginaries. The dissertation analyzes hunting along two axes: the legal - extra-legal axis examining how individuals navigated state-imposed categories of hunter and poacher; and the professional - recreational axis investigating the role of hunting as both a highly regulated professional activity and a cultured recreational activity. Overall, by exploring how hunting fit into the late Soviet informal economy and how it affected human - animal relations, this dissertation seeks to contribute to both the social and environmental histories of Central Asia and the wider Soviet Union.



Adam Willson

(Slavic Languages and Literatures, Northwestern University)

Joseph Bradley and Christine Ruane Research Grant in Russian Studies

“At the Margins of Soviet Empire: Epic Performance and Literature in Central Asia and Siberia”

This dissertation examines how late Soviet Central Asian and Siberian Russophone authors—Kyrgyz Chyngyz Aitmatov, Kazakh Olzhas Suleimenov, and Nivkh Vladimir Sangi—preserved and refashioned local epic performance as historiography, identity formation, and political critique within the framework of Soviet socialist realism. I argue that these authors’ distinctive style consisted in a dynamic combination of oral-derived performative techniques—lyrical and proverbial language, “thematic patterning,” dramatized improvisations of epic storytelling—and modernist textual devices drawing from Russian and Soviet literary and cultural paradigms. This hybrid literature connects contemporary Central Asian readers to the continuous, living tradition of their ancestors and unsettles top-down Soviet narratives while instantiating new national identities within the framework of Russian-language culture. Building on oral formulaic theory, performance studies, and decolonial thought, I develop the concept of the epic performative text to describe how these authors’ works outwardly conform to Soviet ideological forms while cultivating alternative histories, social and national affiliations, and sources of authority, rooted in hereditary communal practice. By reading Soviet non Russian literature through the lens of epic performance, my analysis traces an ongoing stewardship of traditional practice that bridges the Soviet period, thus intervening in scholarship that locates agency primarily in Moscow-sanctioned state institutions or dissident art and often treats oral performance and modern literature separately. My research contributes to an ongoing reassessment of Eurasian cultural studies that exposes the complexities of Russian prestige, decentering and actualizing it in its multiform correspondences with a non-Russian Eurasian historical perspective.



Diana Yayloyan

(History, Georgetown University)

“Fugitive Ecologies in the Ottoman–Turkish Borderlands, 1870–1940”

This dissertation examines how contests over terrain, mobility, and property regimes across the eastern Anatolia–Transcaucasus borderland between 1870 and 1940 shaped both the everyday lives of local communities and broader processes of imperial and post-imperial transformation. Bringing together social and environmental history with scholarship on borderlands and fugitivity, it treats this region as a connected ecological space, linked by mountains, forests, seasonal labor routes, flight, fugitivity, and transhumant movement, rather than by the administrative boundaries imposed by states. Methodologically, I combine multilingual state and non-state archives with oral testimonies to reconstruct both official classifications of mobility and the lived practices from below that exceeded, evaded, or subverted them.



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“The ASEES Dissertation Research Grant enabled me to conduct essential archival research in Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia on the international worker photography movement for my dissertation. Workers’ culture between the wars represented an extraordinary effort to rethink culture democratically—a task unrealized to this day. Yet its history is still largely unknown, and its archive is scattered across institutions, countries, and private collections. With ASEES’ support, I was able to recover some of its traces and reconstruct an international culture that was built and sustained from below—and that, in the 1930s, increasingly rearticulated itself as an anti-fascist force.”

Esa Purschke (German, Princeton University)
2025 Dissertation Research Grant Recipient

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2026 ASEEES Grants & Fellowships

Summer Dissertation Writing Grant Recipients

Aiduosai Amantai

(History, Binghamton University)

“Beyond Imperial Narratives: Kazakh Trade with the Qing and Russia (1730s-1820s)”



This dissertation examines Kazakh trade with the Qing and Russian empires from the 1730s to the 1820s. Drawing on Kazakh, Chinese, Russian, and Manchu sources, this project shows how Kazakh pastoral communities actively shaped trade and diplomatic relations in the region, particularly the terms of exchange with the Qing and Russia, and points to how Kazakhs’ systems of environmental adaptation compelled such commercial initiative. As it explains, exchange with Qing and Russian markets was closely tied to ecological conditions, especially to Kazakh nomads’ need to reduce livestock herd sizes during harsh winters and periods of likely herd loss. Further, by tracing the movement of livestock and other goods, this research demonstrates that the Kazakh steppe functioned as an “inland sea”: a vast and fluid space for commercial exchange whose roads (Kazakh migratory routes) and ports (steppe-based nodes for trade) were largely controlled and fostered by Kazakh tribes, whose nomadic environmental strategies made them active agents of the long-distance movement and exchange of goods across Inner Asia. In this telling, Kazakhs are not at the margins of global economic history, but critical in sustaining, repairing, and fostering the overland movement of commodities, being full participants in the global economic trends of their time.

Gaukhar Baltabayeva

(Politics and Global Studies, Arizona State University)

“Exiled but Engaged? Possibilities of Activism among Russian Wartime Migrants”



Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a large wave of migration, producing new forms of political engagement among Russian migrants across diverse host-country contexts, predominantly in the former Soviet region and the EU. This dissertation examines why some Russian wartime migrants engage in activism in exile while others—despite prior experience of political participation—disengage, and how patterns of migrant political participation vary under conditions of mobility, transnational repression, and uncertainty. Drawing on two waves of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 and 2025 with Russian migrants across multiple countries, including Georgia, Armenia, Poland, and the Netherlands, the study offers a comparative account of migrant activism. The first chapter of the dissertation provides an empirical mapping of the post-2022 migration wave, highlighting its internal diversity in terms of timing, individual motivations, and socio-political profiles. It develops a typology of migrant engagement, distinguishing between different types and forms of activism, and traces how these evolve over time and across contexts. The analysis demonstrates that migrants’ engagement is shaped not only by prior activist experience under authoritarian rule in Russia but also by the uneven conditions of reception they encounter in their host countries, including legal precarity, economic constraints, and exposure to transnational repression. Building on these insights, Chapter 2 develops a theoretical framework to explain variation in migrant activism by linking structural conditions to individual-level perceptions. In particular, the framework identifies three key factors—legal security, economic security,

and perceived efficacy—that jointly shape migrants’ willingness and capacity to engage politically. It proposes that while some migrants sustain or expand their activism in exile, others strategically withdraw or shift toward less visible forms of engagement in response to changing risks and constraints. Chapter 3 then assesses the explanatory power of this framework through an online survey experiment with Russian migrants, testing how perceived legal security influences willingness to participate in different forms of activism. By bridging insights from the literature on diaspora politics, migration, and authoritarianism, this dissertation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of political behavior in exile as well as Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies more broadly. It highlights how activism is reconfigured based on migrants’ perceptions of risk and security stemming from Russia’s transnational reach and host countries’ legal regimes. Thus, rather than viewing migration as an enabling or constraining condition, the dissertation underscores the importance of considering both structural environments and subjective perceptions in explaining migrant engagement in activism.

Klaudia Cierluk

(Comparative Literary Studies,
Northwestern University)

“Somatic Dissidence: Self-Violence in Women’s Writing from the Communist Bloc and Dictatorship- Era Southern Cone of Latin America (1940s-1980s)”



Lena, the protagonist of Elżbieta Łapczyńska’s *Bestiariusz Nowohucki* (2020), is a Polish-Jewish metallurgist employed in Nowa Huta’s steel mill in the 1950s who ingests arsenic daily to cope with harsh working conditions. By allowing her body to deteriorate, Lena rejects the system that extracts labor and reproductive capacity from the sick and the poor. This project examines how contemporary Central European and Latin American literature represents acts of bodily self-harm (refusing treatment, self-poisoning, sabotage, and self-mutilation) as responses to intersecting forms of state, gendered, and environmental violence. Drawing on biopolitics, environmental humanities, and trauma studies, I argue that these texts imagine the body simultaneously as a site of labor extraction and as a medium of refusal. I term

this paradoxical form of agency “somatic dissidence” as embodied practices through which self-directed harm interrupts regimes of productivity, medical control, and communist/neoliberal futurity. During the late twentieth century, the Communist Bloc of Central Europe and the dictatorship-era Southern Cone constituted parallel regimes of authoritarian control over bodies, labor, and everyday life. The central question of this project is why, and in what forms, the motif of self-violence appears across works by women authors from these regions, and in contemporary novels that revisit that period.

Mariam Donadio

(Philosophy, Stony Brook University)

“The Artsakh Question: The Phenomenon of the Genocidal”



The traditional understanding of “genocide,” rooted in the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention and largely accepted by theorists, analysts, and the international community, frames genocide as a single phenomenon or event with a beginning, middle, and end. It underscores intent (*mens rea*) as the element that transforms instances of violence into the crime of genocide. “The Artsakh Question: The Phenomenon of the Genocidal” argues that though the traditional understanding of genocide seeks to provide a foundation for international law, it constrains how genocidal violence is recognized, understood, and addressed. This project is twofold. On the one hand, it critiques the insufficiency of existing frameworks; on the other hand, it argues in favor of a framework of structural genocidal violence that offers a more comprehensive approach for identifying and addressing the full range of tactics used to destroy a people. It seeks to shift the focus from the crime of genocide alone toward an understanding of the phenomenon of the genocidal. It further argues that, by attending to the lived experiences of Armenians in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), we can better understand exactly how genocidal violence permeates every aspect of life.

Elena Hoffenberg

(History, University of Chicago)

“Making a Living and Making a Life: Capitalist Crisis and Jewish Futures in Interwar Poland”

“Making a Living and Making a Life” asks how political and economic forms shape intimate life through studying the Jewish middle class in interwar Poland. Across the territories that today exist in Lithuania, Belarus, western Ukraine, and eastern Poland, Jews made up a disproportionate number of the merchants, artisans, and shopkeepers who formed the middle class of the region’s towns and small cities before the Second World War. This economic pattern formed Jewish social habits and cultural expectations. It also provided a powerful impetus to coteritorial nationalist movements to prioritize the creation of their own middle class through removing Jews from these economic positions. Focusing on areas of everyday life and family-making subject to economic pressures, each chapter traces how people respond to the gap between what they expect and what they experience. As a work of social and cultural history, my dissertation examines the actions and writings of a broad swath of individuals to uncover vernacular and historically-specific understandings of abstract concepts like the future, continuity, and investment.



Alexa Kurmanov

(Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley)

“Postsocialist Wake: Ethnographies of Trans Life in Kyrgyzstan”

“Postsocialist Wake” is an autoethnographic and interdisciplinary project which integrates Black Studies, Central Asian Studies, and anthropology to examine the lived experiences of the Kyrgyz trans community in present-day Bishkek. The project analyzes Kyrgyz trans life in the wake of Russian Imperialism and Soviet modernization, focusing on palimpsestic material and ideological remains within law, medicine, and regimes of documentation. These institutional structures, alongside national discourses of gender and nationality, often render the intersection of trans and Kyrgyz subjectivity as incompatible. Building on Christina Sharpe’s concept of the wake and Anne Stoler’s notion of duress, this project demonstrates how Kyrgyz trans life is conditioned by local and transnational “partial inscriptions” of empire historically underpinned by anti-Blackness. Analyzing trans Kyrgyz life through the lens of the wake, this project maps how the afterlives of empire and socialism persist within the transition to neoliberalism, ultimately revealing the region’s entanglement with global regimes of anti-Blackness. Overall, this dissertation project opens new ways to situate trans masculine, trans feminine, and nonbinary Kyrgyz experiences beyond national borders, integrating them into broader discourses of racial capitalism, global structures of white supremacy and global anti-Blackness.



Maria Matilde Morales

(Comparative Literature, Harvard University)

“The Facts of the Subject: Early Soviet Technophilia and the Turns to the Self”

This dissertation examines the relationship of artistic subject-formation to technology and information regimes. In the 1920s, Soviet avant-garde artists and intellectuals engaged in a sustained exploration of this question, as part of the project of postrevolutionary life-building (*zhiznestroenie*), the development of the new Soviet person, and the move away from so-called bourgeois subjectivity. This decade also marked a transition toward valorizing documentary aesthetics, the turn to fact, and the accompanying theorization of montage as a compositional method across media. Walter Benjamin, observing the process of resubjectivization during his stay in Moscow over the winter of 1926–1927, remarked positively on “the withering away of private life” under Bolshevism. My dissertation argues that, far from being abolished, private life was rediscovered as a crucial source of artistic material by artists in the 1920s and 1930s. Through a transmedia analysis of literary sources, visual art, and experimental documentary film, I consider how artists in this period sought to treat subjectivity and emotions as having factual existence. My work considers the Soviet case, with its ideological and historic specificities, in comparative dialogue with avant-garde circles in Poland, Latin America, and the United States.



Nikoloz Nadirashvili

(Art History, University of Washington)

“The Abuse of Faith: Secularized Christian Imagery and the Politics of Desire”

“The Abuse of Faith,” as the title alludes, navigates the conceptual dimensions of religiosity and sexuality; specifically, I trace how, in authoritarian contexts, the two are juxtaposed, sublimated into one another, and eventually come to substitute for each other. I base my analysis primarily on imagery produced within religious and political propaganda, as well as by those opposing such suppression—artists and activists. My chronology begins with the late years of Portugal’s twentieth-century Catholicism-based dictatorship, *Estado Novo*, and moves to the other extreme of continental Europe, Georgia, tracing its trajectory from the late Soviet period—when religion gradually regained popularity—to the neo-Soviet present, in which the Georgian Orthodox Church has openly consolidated oligarchic rule and reinforced authoritarianism, primarily by labeling all those committed to gender equality and sexual liberation as threats to Georgian identity. My forthcoming task examines the digital multimodal content produced by Church-allied social networks. Specifically, through series and computational discourse analysis, I aim to test the hypothesis that right-wing religious platforms intensify their propagandistic strategies at moments when the government’s positioning is most fragile, thereby functioning as a surrogate stabilizing force.



Anel Rakhimzhanova

(Performance Studies,
New York University)

**“Moving Matters:
Performing Modernity
in Central Asia”**

“Moving Matters” examines how infrastructures and practices for capturing movement —ranging from railroads and “agit-prop” to cartography and the moving image—have shaped ideas of modernity and their representation. Rather than following a linear chronology, the work is structured as a series of “performances of modernity,” each chapter investigating a specific method of enacting progress through shifting technologies and paradigms of movement in late Tsarist and Soviet railway projects, as well as contemporary commemorative and artistic repertoires. This research sits at the intersection of performance studies and Soviet and Central Asian history, utilizing interdisciplinary approaches to examine the material and embodied aspects of logistics, human mobilities, and environmental transformations.

**Bitia Takrimi**

(Slavic Languages and Literature,
Northwestern University)

**Memory, Poetics, and
Cultural Exchange
in Modern Eurasian
Literature**

This dissertation examines the relationship between memory, poetic language, and cultural exchange in modern Eurasian literature.

Bringing together literary analysis, translation studies, and theories of poetics, the project explores how writers and poets negotiate questions of identity, history, displacement, and artistic form across periods of political and social transformation.



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“The ASEEES Summer Writing Grant I received was incredibly generous and provided me with valuable support and financial stability to keep my dissertation-writing a top priority over the course of a busy summer. Because of the grant I was able to transition swiftly into researching and writing my second dissertation chapter as well as workshopping these new drafts with colleagues outside of my institution while moving and making other transitions between academic years. It meant a lot to feel recognized and encouraged by colleagues in this professional association and the support is invaluable for scholars at this stage like myself.”

Samuel Page (Slavic Languages and Literatures, Stanford University)
2025 Summer Dissertation Writing Grant Recipient

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From the Margins to the Center: Innovative Pedagogical Approaches in Polish Studies

By Nikolas Weyland

On March 31, 2026, a group of scholars gathered virtually for an [engaging Zoom roundtable](#) on innovative approaches to teaching Polish studies and Polish history. This teaching roundtable was an event planned to set the stage for the upcoming announcement of the [Polish Studies Association's 2026 Syllabus Award Competition](#). The award for this 2026 competition, which carries a \$500 stipend, will honor the syllabus that showcases the most innovative approach to teaching Polish studies within transnational and global contexts. Held every other year, this competition furthers a core goal of the PSA, namely the recognition and dissemination of novel methods for teaching Polish studies. Several of the presenters at the March 31st teaching roundtable participated in the 2024 iteration of the PSA's Syllabus Award competition, which Agnieszka Jeżyk, the Maria Kott Endowed Assistant Professor of

Polish Studies at the University of Washington, won for a course entitled "[The Other in Other Europe: Poland's Racial and Ethnic Other](#)." The other submissions for the 2024 competition are published at this site.

Five scholars with innovative approaches to teaching Polish studies spoke at the March 31st roundtable about some of their recently offered courses. Most striking was their shared aim: to elevate perspectives from Polish history that were once viewed as marginal to the centerpiece of their courses. Whether focusing on borderland regions like Galicia, incorporating the voices of ethnoreligious minorities in Poland into their curriculum, or centering around questions of gender and sexuality, all of the courses revealed novel approaches to teaching Polish studies that broke with more traditional molds.

The Other in Other Europe: Poland's Racial and Ethnic Other



"The Art of Disappearing" (2012) dir.
Piotr Rosołowski and Bartosz
Konopka

Course Description:

"White Negroes of Europe" is how Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Haiti's first emperor, referred to the Poles who joined the 1791 revolution against Napoleon's army.

This phrase was meant to show respect and reflected the solidarity of the Polish people as a nation without a country and their bond with the insurgents. However, the Polish attitude towards racial and ethnic diversity was not always positive. It ranged from openness, hospitality, curiosity, and fascination to patronizing superiority and even clear hatred. This course will explore how race and ethnicity are portrayed in Polish national discourse and culture, both from within and outside perspectives. We will examine the concept of otherness in relation to minority groups such as Jews, Roma, Germans, and Rusyns, as well as distant "others" like Africans, Haitians, and Chinese. Additionally, we will analyze the representations of Black and Asian subjects in Polish culture to understand the complex web of cultural influences. The course will also address how mainstream Polish culture includes or excludes minority voices. No prior knowledge of Polish language is necessary, and the course fulfills the diversity credit.

Agnieszka Jeżyk's award-winning Submission from the 2024 PSA Syllabus Award Competition

Friedrich Cain and Christoph Maisch began the roundtable by relating their experiences teaching a joint research seminar entitled “[Transregionality and Transculturality in Historical Galicia and Ukraine](#)” that ran during the summer of 2023. Cain serves as a postdoctoral assistant at the University of Vienna’s Chair of Historical Transregional Studies, while Maisch, a postdoctoral researcher and science manager, specializes in interdisciplinary Central and Eastern European Studies. As Cain underscored in his opening remarks, “Transregionality and Transculturality in Historical Galicia” brought together student participants at the undergraduate and graduate level who hailed from four different countries—Germany, Austria, Poland, and Ukraine—and a wide set of disciplinary backgrounds. Cain and Maisch belonged to a strikingly transnational, multilingual, and interdisciplinary set of instructors for the course that also included Monika Janicka of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Wiera Meniok of the Drohobych State Pedagogical University of Ivan Franko, and Lothar Quinkenstein of Adam Mickiewicz University.

At the course’s intellectual core, as Maisch articulated in his remarks, lay a basic question: what happens when one stops treating a region like Galicia as a stable entity and instead approaches it as a site of competing national narratives? Foregrounding Galicia as a contested, multiperspectival space, the course thus sought to deconstruct the national frameworks through which the region’s history and culture have often been studied in favor of a focus on cultural entanglement. One could imagine “Transregionality and Transculturality in Historical Galicia and Ukraine” serving as a model for designing courses on other contested borderland regions in Central and

Eastern Europe, such as Silesia or Bohemia.

Given its geographically dispersed participant base, this 2023 course proceeded in a hybrid format. All students completed a combined online preparation for the in-person research seminar, which eventually took place during an intensive week in Lublin. Due to the ongoing full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the course participants were unfortunately unable to meet in the heart of historic Galicia but settled on Lublin as an adequate substitute. During their meetings in Lublin, the students engaged in wide-ranging discussions about historical imaginaries of Galicia while also undertaking various excursions, including to the Nazi concentration and extermination camp of Majdanek. Following their return to their home institutions, the students recorded final audio or video podcasts in which they cogitated on their experiences in the seminar.

As Cain and Maisch both underscored, the course’s primary merit was also its principal challenge, as the promise of transnational scholarly engagement simultaneously presented significant difficulties of coordination and funding challenges. Nonetheless, both speakers clearly stressed that the benefits of cross-border cooperation and transnational academic discussion outweighed any logistical challenges. Galicia’s rich multicultural heritage was mirrored by the lively, productive conversations that transpired between students from Drohobych, Frankfurt (Oder), Poznań, and Vienna in Lublin during the summer of 2023.

Keely Stauter-Halsted followed Cain and Maisch’s remarks with a presentation on a course entitled “The Making of Modern Poland,” her recurring introductory lecture class at the University of Illinois Chicago

(UIC) that she again offered during the spring of 2026. Stauter-Halsted, Professor and Stefan and Lucy Hejna Family Chair in the History of Poland at UIC, identified parallels between her own course and the one on which Cain and Maisch had just presented. Indeed, Stauter-Halsted highlighted that her course fundamentally aimed to challenge traditional notions of Polish identity that its students might initially hold—especially the notion of an immutable, age-old Polish-Catholic synthesis—by stressing the central role of ethnic minorities and religious diversity in the country’s history. Just as Cain and Maisch’s course aimed to destabilize nationalist conceptions of Galician history, Stauter-Halsted’s course thus emphasized the variable meanings of Polishness over time. Challenging students to engage with edgy, complicated questions lay at the heart of “The Making of Modern Poland.” The role of Mieszko I in the slave trade, antisemitism in Poland, collaboration with occupying forces during the Second World War, and resistance during the Communist period were but some of the weighty themes that Stauter-Halsted encouraged students in the course to ponder and discuss.

As an introductory course whose students often arrive with only limited experience in History classes, especially those concerning Polish topics, “The Making of Modern Poland” is targeted toward a different set of students than the more specialized course on the history of Galicia that Cain and Maisch helped to organize. Nonetheless, its ambit is wide-ranging, with the readings, lectures, and assignments in the course exposing its students to a stimulating set of pressing historical questions. Stauter-Halsted covers over ten centuries of Polish history in the course while also devoting time during each class for students to discuss contemporary issues in Poland with

an eye toward their historical geneses. Moreover, the assignments that Stauter-Halsted designed for the latest iteration of the course in 2026 ranged from more traditional papers to a required presentation on a famous Pole of each student's choosing. "The Making of Modern Poland" therefore represents a departure from standard lecture courses on Polish history by encouraging students to question traditional understandings of Polishness, to consistently reflect on connections between past and present in the country, to pursue their own specific areas of interest in certain individual assignments, and to develop their critical reasoning abilities in frequent discussions about complex historical topics. Stauter-Halsted's presentation articulated a compelling blueprint for how to design a systematic and innovative introductory lecture course in Polish history, one that blends classic texts with newer materials and mixes traditional papers with creative assignments.

Michał Wilczewski, Associate Professor of Instruction in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Northwestern University, continued the roundtable presentations with a dive into three courses in Polish studies and East-Central European history that he has recently taught. Incidentally, Wilczewski is Stauter-Halsted's former dissertation advisee and served as a teaching assistant in "The Making of Modern Poland" for several semesters at UIC.

Three courses, "Sex in the Slavic World," "Sin, Skin, and Spectacle: Sexuality in East Central Europe," and "Queer Lives in East-Central Europe" were the focus of Wilczewski's presentation. While "Sex in the Slavic World" is a first-year seminar in which Wilczewski also introduces freshman students to college-level writing and discussion, "Sin, Skin, and

Spectacle" and "Queer Lives in East-Central Europe" are geared toward upper-level students. Owing to, as Wilczewski put it, a contemporary explosion of literature on gender and sexuality in Polish historiography, his courses draw significantly on newer works in the field of Polish studies. Wilczewski argued that recent innovations in Polish historiography have thus broadened his pedagogical possibilities, enabling instructors such as himself to draw on more substantial bodies of literature and more developed intellectual frameworks in designing such courses.

Many students...often initially found the material difficult to digest because it so thoroughly challenged many of their foundational notions.

Normalizing the study of gender and sexuality in Polish history and facilitating the unlearning of common stereotypes and conceptions about Poland and East-Central Europe constituted a shared goal for Wilczewski across all three of these courses. Invoking Stauter-Halsted's "The Making of Modern Poland" course at UIC, Wilczewski contended that many students in his courses often initially found the material difficult to digest because it so thoroughly challenged many of their foundational notions about East-Central Europe as a culturally conservative, even "backward" region. Indeed, Wilczewski noted that students were often, for instance, surprised to learn that several countries in East-Central Europe decriminalized homosexuality well before many of those in the west. Instead of merely presenting the study of gender and sexuality in modern Poland as a clash between cultural progressivism and conservative panic, Wilczewski's courses take a different approach, such as foregrounding

the study of everyday life through the lens of desire. Discussions about gender and sexuality, Wilczewski's courses seek to highlight, lay at the heart of foundational contestations over the contours and meanings of Polishness and East-Central European politics in the modern world. Topics once deemed marginal and peripheral by historians are, as Wilczewski's course designs elucidate, critical to understanding modern Polish identity. Indeed, they can serve as *the* central lens through which to study modern Poland and to structure a rich, engaging college course.

Vladyslava Moskalets, a researcher at the Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe in Lviv as well as an Associate Professor at the Department of History and Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Program at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, concluded the roundtable presentations with an introduction to a course that she co-taught during the spring/summer term of 2024. Along with Kornelia Kończal and Yaroslav Zhuravlov of Bielefeld University, Moskalets co-instructed a course entitled "[Entangled Borderland: History and Memory of Habsburg Galicia in the Long 19th Century and Beyond](#)" that was open to both undergraduate and graduate students from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, among them History and Philology. Consequently, Moskalets noted that many students who enrolled in the course initially did so for a variety of reasons, with some wishing to learn more about Jewish life in Galicia, others about the region's place in the Polish popular imaginary, and others because of its place in Ukrainian history. Much like the aforementioned course on Galicia, "Entangled Borderland" benefitted from this mix of interests and perspectives among its student participants. Moskalets' presentation also highlighted how deeply academic

interdisciplinarity furthered the aims of the course organizers to foster wide-ranging, intercultural discussions among their students.

As Moskalets explained, this course was a blended seminar that included both an online component and on-site research trips to Ukrainian Greek Catholic religious sites and the *Galiziendeutsches Archiv* (at the *Martin-Opitz-Bibliothek* in Herne) in the German federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia, although only the student participants at Bielefeld University were ultimately able to participate in the latter excursions. Each online session was organized around a central theme—among them, “Galicia? Galicia(s)!,” “Religion,” “Migration,” “Violence,” and “Galicia’s afterlife in Austria, Poland, Ukraine and in Jewish communities”—with accompanying discussion questions to prime the conversation among the student participants. As its title suggests, this course foregrounded cultural entanglement in Galicia,

rather than merely viewing the region as the site of conflict between warring nationalist factions. The course’s thematic organization, Moskalets suggested, forced students to reckon with the impact that changing forms of political control in Galicia exercised on notions of collective belonging in the region and to challenge common misconceptions or stereotypes about the region’s place in Eastern Europe. Much like Cain and Maisch, Moskalets stressed the beneficial impact of interdisciplinarity and transnational cooperation on the learning outcomes in this course, which brought together students from numerous countries and academic backgrounds.

The question-and-answer portion of the roundtable developed into an engaging discussion about pedagogical approaches and course design strategies. Christoph Maisch, Friedrich Cain, and Vladyslava Moskalets spoke at greater length about designing transnational courses with students who possessed different language

skills, revealing that they often combined certain shared materials available to students in languages in which they were proficient, like English, while offering course participants some choice in selecting supplementary readings. Stauter-Halsted and Wilczewski highlighted the occasional difficulty of finding sufficient primary source materials in English for general courses on Polish history at their American universities, while also noting that their introductory lecture courses sometimes inspired students to begin learning Polish or to deepen their existing language skills.

Thereafter, the participants spoke about how most effectively to select class materials and design assignments in Polish studies courses in the current digital age. Maisch and Cain noted that the students in their course responded very positively and creatively toward the class’s final assignment, in which they were tasked with producing their own podcasts

PSA TEACHING ROUNDTABLE

The PSA cordially invites you to a teaching roundtable on innovative pedagogy in Polish studies with the following scholars



Christoph Maisch



Friedrich Cain



Keely Stauter-Halsted



Michał Wilczewski



Vladyslava Moskalets

Announcement for the March 31st PSA Teaching Roundtable.

instead of writing a final paper. Stauter-Halsted found that students at UIC engaged particularly strongly with discussions and assignments in which they were tasked with adjudicating points of contention between different course materials, especially those with edgier bents. She even incorporated small competitions, like extra point awards for the most effective student essay titles, and creative exercises, like a map drawing exercise of the Polish Second Republic, into her course design strategy. Wilczewski highlighted the effectiveness of periodic small-group work within larger seminars, noting that students often held each other accountable and developed stronger confidence with the material in those settings. Citing a technique implemented by her co-instructor Kornelia Kończal, Moskalets elucidated a strategy that worked well in the course on Galician history about which she presented; at the end of each course meeting, every student was required to distill their main learning takeaway into a one-sentence summary.

The last part of the roundtable discussion turned toward future course design plans. Wilczewski noted that he wished to fine-tune an envisioned course on everyday life in modern Poland but was still working to find adequate materials in English for such a class, especially on the period before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moskalets was especially interested in incorporating architectural study and visits to historic sites in Galicia into her future courses in Lviv. Cain and Maisch highlighted an interest in future collaborative, transnational courses but also noted that they needed to work out certain funding challenges and issues with cross-university coordination. Maisch also expressed a desire to once again attend the Bruno Schulz festival in Drohobych with future students,

which he has not been able to do since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine commenced in 2022. All of the speakers at the roundtable expressed a desire to further exchange pedagogical techniques with their co-participants.

The productive exchange of ideas that emerged during the roundtable discussions pointed toward the fruitfulness of organizing regular teaching events in the future. New syllabi and innovative pedagogical techniques are often shared among academics at a much lower rate than published scholarly works, so teaching roundtables can serve as a crucial forum for discussions about instruction and course design. As the participants in the roundtable also underscored, their experiences teaching these courses complemented their own research pursuits and conceptualization of pertinent historiography. More broadly, teaching roundtables can play a crucial role in stimulating dialogue about shifting scholarly frameworks of analysis, the absorption of newer academic literature into various disciplinary fields, and the structuring of productive intellectual debate.



Nikolas Weyland is a History PhD candidate at Harvard University. His dissertation investigates the sociopolitical activities of Polish-speaking migrants and their descendants in the German Ruhr region between the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries while especially focusing on the treatment of these “Ruhrpolen” by German state officials, companies, and sociologists.

[Submit a syllabus to the](#)

[PSA's 2026 Syllabus Award Competition](#)

Deadline: September 1, 2026

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The ASEEES President and Vice President use the volunteer list to nominate the committee roster for the following year, which the Board must approve. Please keep in mind that each committee usually has one open position in a given year.

Member News



Katharina Bluhm published [*Russia and the West: Ideology, Economy, and Politics in the Post-Soviet Era*](#) with Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Michael David-Fox was appointed [*Rector of the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen*](#).

Margareta Matache published [*The Permanence of Anti-Roma Racism: \(Un\)uttered Sentences*](#) with Routledge.

Matthew Lee Miller published a Russian-language edition of [*The American YMCA and Russian Culture*](#) with Academic Studies Press.

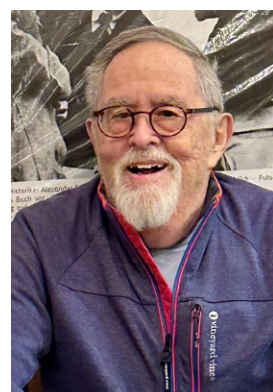
Jessica Pisano was named a [*2026 Andrew Carnegie Fellow*](#).

Katerina Sergatskova published [*Goodbye, ISIS: What Remains is Future*](#) with Academic Studies Press. The book was translated and edited by Kate Tsurkan.

Adelina Ștefan was awarded the [*Society for Romanian Studies Book Prize*](#) for [*Vacationing in Dictatorships: International Tourism in Socialist Romania and Franco's Spain*](#) (Cornell University Press, 2024).

Elena Yushkova published [*A Revolutionary Dancer in Revolutionary Russia: Isadora Duncan in Russian and Soviet Culture*](#) with Amsterdam University Press–CEU Press.

————— In Memoriam —————



Alexander Rabinowitch, Emeritus Professor of History at Indiana University Bloomington, passed away on June 15, 2026. Read the obituary [here](#).



Bernice Glazer Rosenthal, Professor Emerita of History at Fordham University, passed away on June 1, 2026. Read the obituary [here](#).