



the  
**slavic scene**

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# letter from the chair

Dear friends,

As always, this past academic year was very busy for our department. We maintain healthy enrollments in our classes, being one of very few schools in the U.S. that offers five Slavic languages: Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (B/C/S), Czech, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian. Last year we were joined by a new diverse cohort of five graduate students, two of whom came from Nazarbayev University in the Republic of Kazakhstan, and in the next year we will welcome two more graduate students. In September, we hosted Professor Marek Nekula from the University of Regensburg in Germany who gave an interdisciplinary graduate mini-course "Performing Memory: Cultures of Memory in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989." This was our first experiment with this format, which turned out to be successful, and the course attracted students from different programs. Building on the success of that course, we began planning a joint workshop between our Universities on the topic "History in Literature – Literature in Historiography" which was supposed to take place in Regensburg in May 2020.

In November, two distinguished visitors from Russia, Professor Natalia Mazur from the European University at

St. Petersburg, and Professor Maria Neklyudova from Moscow School of Social and Economic Studies, visited our department on their way to the ASEES annual convention. They presented their innovative research on the history of emotions and visual culture and met with our faculty and graduate students as part of the planning process for the summer school of Russian Culture to be held in Moscow and St. Petersburg in June 2020. While I was on my research leave in Moscow last winter, I met with our Russian colleagues and we finalized the teaching schedule and cultural activities of the summer school. We also discussed further ways of collaboration with our Russian partners such as online teaching, joint conferences, exchange of visiting scholars and instructors, etc. I returned to Ann Arbor on March 8, 2020, full of enthusiasm, looking forward to making all of our ambitious projects happen in the spring and summer.

And then – as Professor Herb Eagle, the Interim Chair, reports:

*Within three days of returning from Winter break in March, we were all informed that the University would be going to remote teaching for the remainder of the semester.*

*We all immediately set to work on converting our courses to this format, using a variety of approaches, from "lecture capture" (video-recording of large lectures) and power-point presentations to greater use of online media, as well as small discussion-class meetings in real-time (particularly for our language classes) on Zoom or Bluejeans. The language classes were a challenge, given the need for active student responses, and all of the lecturers and graduate student instructors teaching language classes initially conferred every few days as they explored the most efficient techniques to use in these classes. Through imagination and effort, we surprised ourselves at how much of our regular curriculum we were able to teach and put ourselves in a very strong position in terms of planning for the fall semester.*

Needless to say, all of our spring and summer plans had to be cancelled. As I write this letter, it is still not clear in what format we will be teaching in the fall. We are currently working on adjusting our courses in such a way that they can be switched between in-person and online options. But we do hope that our spring and summer projects in Germany and Russia will take place in 2021, fingers crossed.



Mikhail Krutikov

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mikhail Krutikov".

Mikhail Krutikov

*As this newsletter was about to go to print, the whole country was shocked by the tragic death of George Floyd. We condemn the actions that caused his death and the deaths of many, many more people of color across our country. We must stand together at this time to support all members of our community and to continue our work to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion within our department, the university, and the world.*

# highlights

## Going Online in ... 3, 2, 1

by *Tricia Kalosa, Executive Assistant to the Chair*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities across the country moved students off-campus and faculty moved to online instruction in record time. To better understand the immense challenge of this overnight transition, our faculty share their insights into moving entirely to an online teaching format.

### How did you approach moving your classes online in a matter of a few days?

"We worked as a team and met with all lecturers, who were very helpful. I asked the Language Resource Center for help and they were awesome, explaining technical issues and suggesting strategies for teaching, organizing materials, and keeping students involved."

—*Piotr Westwalewicz, Lecturer IV, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

### Was there anything that surprised you about the process of moving your classes online?

"I was surprised to learn how critically important personal face-to-face interaction is in teaching and learning."

—*Olga Maiorova, Associate Professor, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

"In communicating with students individually, I got a more accurate understanding of what many students were understanding and where they were having difficulty."

—*Herb Eagle, Associate Professor, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

### Did you encounter anything unexpected during one of your virtual classes?

"Students had different kinds of internet connection issues and international students, I think, had to make quite big sacrifices by attending their classes in the middle of the night. I also didn't expect my students to dislike online instruction quite so much. Everyone missed in-person classes, which sometimes made the mood a bit sad."

—*Ania Aizman, Assistant Professor and Postdoctoral Scholar, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

"Absolutely, there are parents, siblings, dogs, and cats that unexpectedly entered our virtual classroom without being aware of it. Rather joyful moments. Some of my students experienced problems related to technology."

—*Ewa Pasek, Lecturer II, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

### How did you adjust your teaching style when you learned you would have to teach virtually?

"I cut down some of my course requirements. In my undergraduate class with seventy students, I offered more detailed lectures and PowerPoint presentations and I allowed them [the option of] submitting a small final project. In my graduate seminar, I allowed students to submit their research papers in an incomplete form since the library was closed. But I asked them to accompany their papers with a detailed plan of how they will complete it when all the sources become available again. In both classes, I held online office hours."

—*Olga Maiorova, Associate Professor, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

"I assigned my students a variety of independent activities that did not require my direct involvement, yet provided constant exposure to the target language [in the form of] movies, COVID-19-related blogs, songs, and memes. Since a majority of students in Europe also went online and were more flexible in terms of time, I arranged Skype peer tutoring between my students and students in the Czech Republic."

—*Ewa Pasek, Lecturer II, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

"I introduced more visual-based teaching."

—*Nina Shkolnik, Lecturer II, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

"I stressed discussion even more than before and, since Russian 499 is about conversational practice, we probably spent a little less time on substantive [material], and a little more on conversation."

—*Ania Aizman, Assistant Professor and Postdoctoral Scholar, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

### Will you apply anything you learned about technology in the last few months to your future in-person classes?

"Having familiarity with the technology, which I gained over the last few months, will be very helpful in my future teaching."

—*Nina Shkolnik, Lecturer II, Slavic Languages and Literatures*

# in the classroom

## New Graduate Mini-Courses and Workshops

by *Tatjana Aleksic, Associate Professor*

During the fall 2019 semester, and before the pandemic turned our lives into the current state of uncertainty and insecurity, I taught three new mini-seminars and workshops in the Slavic and comparative literature departments. At this point, it may be important to note that should we be forced to continue our professional existence as online avatars for any amount of time, small seminars of this type can easily be converted into an online-only format.

Of these three 1-credit graduate seminars, the one I taught for the Slavic department was a modification of a previously team-taught 800-level course on literary and critical theory from broadly understood "Slavic cultural spaces." It now became a third of that old course, with a third of the reading load, and a third of a research paper length. In all these conversions nothing was lost in our approach to the matter and, in fact, it is my impression that the course gained a lot more in clarity and focus, given that the students were able to work in more detail on a limited number of authors, theoretical paradigms, and issues than in the larger course format. The course attracted a group of Slavic first-year graduate students, as well as CREES MA students, and consisted of very lively discussions on some of the

most important writings by Slavoj Žižek, Tzvetan Todorov, or Julia Kristeva, for example. Needless to say that in order to even begin reading these we had to have some extra fun with Freud and Lacan (rhyme unintended).

In the two mini-workshops that I taught for the Department of Comparative Literature during that same semester, students worked intensively on composing a grant proposal (5 weeks), and on converting a piece of scholarly writing into an article for publication (10 weeks). Both seminars were writing- and reading- intensive and were primarily intended for more advanced graduate students who already had a clear research idea which they were hoping to get funded, or a significant piece of writing they were thinking of publishing as an article, respectively. Working for weeks around the table as a group and reading ever-changing and increasingly polished versions of each other's material was a fun, but also considerable task. This painstaking process demonstrated to the participants that the main difficulty in writing such relatively short and genre-specific pieces, like a grant proposal, was achieving the level of concision informed by targeted yet comprehensive research. The success level in

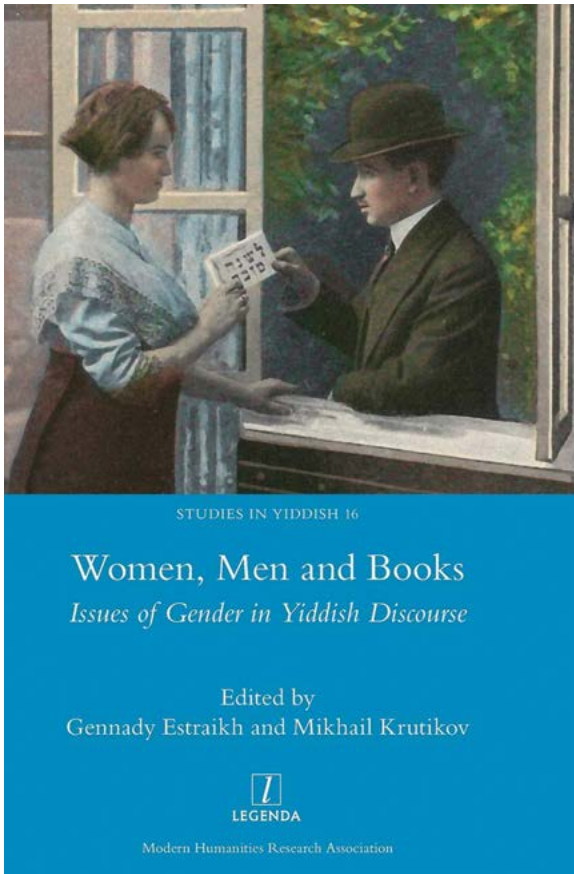


the workshop on converting a piece of writing into a publishable article was mixed, with students who joined with the idea of writing an article from scratch giving up on the idea after a few weeks and instead working more on their research and reading skills. This workshop likewise proved beneficial to more advanced students who had already written a considerable piece, or a chapter segment that lay abandoned, and who had an easier time of formatting it as an article.

# faculty focus

## *Women, Men, and Books: Issues of Gender in Yiddish Discourse*

Edited by Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov. Oxford: Legenda Press, 2019. 194 p.



The book cover of *Women, Men, and Books: Issues of Gender in Yiddish Discourse*.

For centuries, Yiddish has been—and in some communities it still is—commonly perceived as the women’s tongue, as opposed to Hebrew as the language of men. But although the main consumers of Yiddish culture were women, it was produced mostly by men. The complexity of gender dichotomies have been recently explored, questioned, and challenged by a number of distinguished scholars, and this collection is a contribution to the ongoing discussion in this regard.

The chapters in our volume address a wide range of aspects of gender issues from early modernity to contemporary period. Among the topics explored by the contributors are the influence of Renaissance literature on early modern Yiddish didactic poetry; the evolution of traditional Jewish patriarchy in the modern age as it is reflected in Yiddish poetry; the segregation of women in the male-dominated Yiddish canon; gender stereotyping of women by male Yiddish authors; erotic imagery in the works of the Soviet Yiddish poet David Hofshsteyn; gender tensions in the prose of the bilingual Yiddish/Hebrew

author Aharon Reuveni; the invention of a new male persona of the brave Jewish explorer by the Argentine Yiddish novelist Yankev Botoshansky; and representations of gender performance and gender identity in the stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer. This collection is an outcome of a workshop at the Mendel Friedman Conference on Yiddish at the University of Oxford which brought together participants from the U.S., England, France, Poland, Germany, and Israel.

# Pelevin and Unfreedom: Poetics, Politics, Metaphysics

by Sofya Khagi, Associate Professor

My second book, *Pelevin and Unfreedom: Poetics, Politics, Metaphysics*, is in production and will be released by Northwestern University Press in Fall 2020. This is the first book-length English-language study of one of the most significant and popular post-Soviet authors. I explore Pelevin's sustained reflections on the philosophical question of freedom and consider how his complex oeuvre and worldview are shaped by the idea that contemporary social conditions pervert the very premise of freedom. Pelevin uses provocative and imaginative prose to model different systems of unfreedom, vividly illustrating how society today uses hyper-commodification and technological manipulation to promote human degradation and social deadlock. He holds up a mirror to show how social control (now covert, yet far more efficient) masquerades as choice; how eagerly we accept, even welcome, our enslavement by the techno-consumer system. He reflects on how commonplace discursive markers of freedom (like the free market) are misleading and disempowering. Under this comfortably self-occluding bondage, the human subject loses all power of self-determination—the system has effectively obliterated the human as an agent of free will and

ethical judgment. Pelevin sheds light on the disruptive transition from failed Soviet modernity to post-Soviet postmodernity—but I show that he is a crucial writer at this moment because his diagnosis of the contemporary condition resonates with circumstances worldwide. And yet, as I argue, he also holds onto the emancipatory potential of ethics and even an emancipatory humanism, however circumscribed and ironically qualified.

In the book's introduction, I set out the study's objectives, argument, methodology, and layout. The first chapter argues that Pelevin refurbishes classic dystopian conventions by portraying a self-perpetuating dystopia that dismisses the saving qualities of art and love and implicates the entire populace in social deadlock. In the second chapter, I investigate his style as an offshoot of his social critique. Chapter three argues that the trope of humanity as biomass, a zoomorphic community ripe for exploitation, has been a concern in Pelevin's work from the beginning of his career to his recent output. In the fourth chapter, I proceed from animalistic dehumanization to mechanistic dehumanization. Both scenarios of dehumanization—animalistic (humans turned animals/biomass) and mechanistic (humans



turned automatons)—allow Pelevin to elaborate on the lack of freedom in techno-consumer society. The fifth chapter explores Pelevin's eschatology as a facet of his indictment of the contemporary condition. His eschatological narratives, though playful, are malignant, entropic, and non-redemptive. Chapter six focuses on Pelevin's reworking of the alternative history genre. He critically engages contemporary popular mindsets while pursuing his ongoing social and ethical concerns. Chapter seven focuses on two prominent subtexts, the works of Dostoevsky and the Strugatsky brothers. Pelevin draws on the nineteenth-century classic and the Soviet science fiction duo to dramatize his own

dark vision of modernization, progress, and morals. The final chapter investigates the implication of the authorial figure in the very same corrupt social context that gets anatomized in the texts. Both irony and self-irony run through his works, but it is the latter that is pivotal to his poetics. In conclusion, I trace the continuities and transformations of his art, reaffirm its significance, and articulate my view of Pelevin—a consummate performer of postmodernism and an acute critic of postmodernity who posits the problem of individual liberation from a carceral society as an urgent ethical imperative.

# graduate focus

## Multilingual Imperative of Holocaust Memory in Yugoslavia

by McKenna Marko, Ph. D. Student

I've spent the 2019-2020 academic year (pre-COVID), conducting research for my dissertation in libraries, museums, and memorial sites. I'm based in Budapest with easy access to the Balkans, though my cross-border research trips were unfortunately short-lived. Hopefully, they will resume shortly, though I'm happy to be writing this short piece for our Slavic newsletter as it reminds me of our encouraging scholarly community that will persist through the current setbacks and challenges.

My research has been concerned with the multilingual imperative of Holocaust memory in Yugoslavia. I'm mainly interested in film and literature from Vojvodina, an autonomous region in northern Serbia with a substantial Hungarian-speaking population, as well as from Istria and the Julian March, a disputed region amongst Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. While these regions were historically multicultural, -lingual, and -religious, they

underwent unprecedented homogenization that permanently altered their demographic and linguistic landscapes during WWII. The Hungarian occupation of Northern Yugoslavia, Romania, and Ruthenia as my research has shown, also sought to alter the ethnic composition of the borderlands through ethnic cleansing (and many of you might be familiar with the "cold days" in Novi Sad if you took Slavic 312 with Dr. Eagle).

dialects. Yugoslavia presents an interesting case due to the language's collapse alongside the national project in the 1990s, therefore, the mixing of languages and dialects can also be seen as an act of resistance to the language purism and ethnonationalism that emerged during the violent breakup. Overall, I focus on how these languages "turn," as I like to say due to Hungarian's unique verb for translate, "fordít" or "to turn" the language, engage in critical questions surrounding the Holocaust's transmission, and counter-hegemonic narratives of the past. While living in Budapest, I've witnessed firsthand the critical need for much more nuanced scholarship on the Holocaust and WWII in Hungary and the Balkans given the widescale historical revisionism and uncritical rehabilitations of violent legacies occurring daily.

My focus is not entirely on the regions, though geography has played a major role in directing my research. Over the past years of studying B/C/S and Hungarian together, I was drawn to the unmistakable similarities between writers and filmmakers from the Hungarian and Balkan borderlands and how they approach the Holocaust in their works. I've come across a body of works that employ various translational strategies to create a much more pluralistic and transnational understanding of Holocaust memory in Yugoslavia. I work on texts that mediate between Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian, as well as works that use linguistic disjunction, Hungarian syntax embedded within Serbo-Croatian, or the deliberate mixing of languages and

I was invited to several conferences in Belgrade and Subotica in Serbia and Ohrid, Macedonia, though due to COVID-19 they were unfortunately canceled. On another note, for now, I am looking forward to enjoying Budapest's café culture again ... libraries and archives later!



Tourists overwhelming the monument site "Shoes on the Danube", where Hungarian Jews were murdered by members of the fascist Arrow Cross party in 1944



# Congratulations!

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## Rackham Predoctoral Fellow

*Congratulations* to **Grace Mahoney** who will be a Rackham Predoctoral Fellow for the 2020-21 academic year. The Rackham Predoctoral Fellowship is one of the most prestigious awards granted by the Rackham Graduate School. Awards are based on the strength and quality of dissertation abstracts, publications, presentations, and faculty recommendations.



## Dissertation Writing Institute

**Aleks Marciniak** was accepted into Sweetland's Dissertation Writing Institute for the spring 2020 term. The Dissertation Writing Institute is for graduate students whose research is complete or nearly complete, who have conceptualized the principal elements of the dissertation, and who have already begun to write the dissertation. Participants during the Spring 2020 term are asked to work on their dissertation writing for at least six consecutive hours each weekday during the eight weeks of the program. Students participate in remote group discussions, where they share their writing electronically and receive feedback in workshops via communication platforms such as Zoom, Blue Jeans, or Google Meet. In addition, participants receive individual, online writing consultations with a Sweetland faculty member.



## Sweetland Junior Fellow

*Congratulations* to **Michael Martin** who will be a Sweetland Center for Writing Junior Fellow starting in the winter 2021 term. In the fall 2021 term, Michael will teach his own topic related to his discipline under English 125. The Fellows Seminar brings together graduate student instructors (Junior Fellows) and faculty (Senior Fellows) from multiple disciplines who share a commitment to integrating writing in their courses. All seminar participants share an interest in helping students become better writers; integrating writing in their courses; and discussing critical issues in the teaching of writing with colleagues.

# undergraduate student focus

## First-Ever eCommencement Ceremony

by Herb Eagle, Associate Professor

We all experienced the Slavic Department's first ever "remote" graduation on May 1, 2020. Thanks to the organizational efforts of our highly skilled staff members Patricia Kalosa and Jennifer Lucas, and our imaginative and entertaining faculty speakers, the ceremony retained its usual verve and warmth even though the participants were connected only by the screen. Graduating seniors, academic prize winners, parents, siblings, friends, faculty, and staff "zoomed" in from as far away as Greece and Singapore, with some staying up late or getting up very early to participate.

Interim Chair Herb Eagle began the ceremony on a more serious note, wishing for the good health of all in attendance and their families, and offering the department's condolences to those who had lost family or friends to the pandemic. He then reminded the students that the analytical skills they had acquired in learning another language would make it easier for them to master other systems of knowledge in the future, and that the new cultures they had become familiar with (whether Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Czech, Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian) could provide inspiration in facing difficult and challenging times—just as the people who speak these

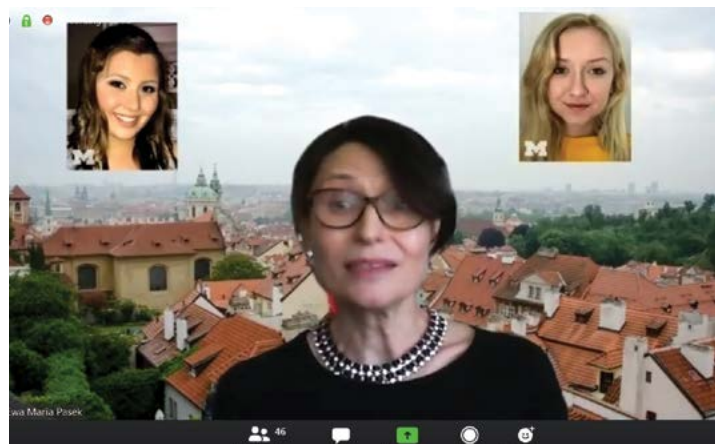


languages had overcome crises throughout their history. Buoyed by their literatures and their arts, these peoples not only survived but preserved their languages and their unique cultures. He urged the graduates to continue to use the languages that they had learned in one-to-one contact with speakers in the respective countries, thus helping to build a world community.

Next, Michael Makin congratulated all of the graduates and the other students present on their strong efforts and outstanding work during the past years. He noted that they have helped us in building the department's strength, through their diligent work in

classes and their participation in various co-curricular activities, including dramatic productions. He pointed out that the current group of graduating majors and minors in Russian is the largest in several decades, and that

students continue to elect majors or minors in our other languages as well. He then presented the departmental awards for best essay of the year in a student's native language, best essay in a language learned in the



Ewa Pasek, Czech language lecturer, and Czech language award winners: Edie Lerner (left corner) and Madylin Eberstein (right corner).

## The New “East European and Eurasian Studies” Minor

*by Jennifer Lucas, Assistant Manager*

department, and best multi-disciplinary project (this year a translation plus analysis of a Russian folktale). He briefly described not only the winning essays and project but also the work of the outstanding runners-up who received honorable mention awards. Then the awards for excellence in language learning were presented by Marija Rosic for Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Ewa Pasek for Czech, Piotr Westwalewicz for Polish, and Svitlana Rogovyk for Ukrainian and for Russian. We had asked awardees as well as graduates to provide us with pictures, so that as the awards were presented we were able, in some cases, to flash the award-winning students' pictures on the screen.

During the actual recognitions of our majors and minors which followed, we were able to supplement this with live streaming of the graduates, as well as in some cases their friends and families, as we applauded them for their accomplishment. We came as close as we could to the feel of our actual live ceremonies. Although we missed the tasty food that usually follows, in compensation we have a graduation ceremony which can be preserved for years to come. It is now available for viewing on the departmental website <https://lsa.umich.edu/slavic/news-events/all-events/graduation-2020.html>.

The Slavic Department's new minor, “East European and Eurasian Studies” was recently approved by the LSA curriculum committee. The new program consolidated two of our recently retired minors, “Cultures & Literatures of Eastern Europe” and “East European Studies.” This multidisciplinary program introduces students to the very diverse and extensive cultural map of Eastern Europe and Eurasia enabling students to look from a variety of different intellectual angles at history, literature, popular culture, and film amongst others. Students acquire broad knowledge of the area and develop sophisticated analytical skills by working on and writing extensively about individual cultural phenomena and their historical and geographical interrelationship.

While other minors in the Slavic Department are specific to a single language community (Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech) or language group (BCS), and require two-years of language study in the area, or equivalent proficiency, as prerequisites, this minor does not have a language requirement. Instead, it makes use of courses students take in English, studying at least two areas of Eastern European and Eurasian culture. The minor is aimed at students who do not have language proficiency in any of the cultures studied, but who are interested in developing cultural proficiency in Eastern European and/or Eurasian Studies.



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We stand together.

**BLACK  
LIVES  
MATTER**

The Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures condemns the actions that caused the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and many, many more people of color. **BLACK LIVES MATTER** and we vow to help “create a world free of anti-Blackness, where every Black person has the social, economic, and political power to thrive.” For the full statement, please see our website, <https://lsa.umich.edu/slavic>