



the
slavic scene

volume 33, spring 2021

Photo by Chronis Yan

lsa.umich.edu/slavic

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letter from the chair



Dear friends,

The COVID pandemic took its toll on our health and well-being. Our students, faculty, and staff faced many difficult challenges in their work and personal lives, and we all had to work hard to keep the department going. We had to learn how to teach online, keeping our students engaged. It was especially difficult for our language instructors who had no personal contact with students. This has been a difficult academic year yet we can now say that this past year was a success. Our graduating class, which we celebrated via a virtual ceremony, was one of the largest over the past few years: 15 majors and 25 minors. Our enrollments remained stable, and some of our classes, such as Professor Herbert Eagle's popular course on East European Cinema, grew in size. It is always a great reward for our instructors to receive warm personal responses from students such as, "I thoroughly enjoyed this course" or "I learned so much in such a short period of time," and this year these messages were especially encouraging.

Understandably, all the in-person events that we had planned, including the conference on the contemporary Russian novelist Viktor Pelevin and the summer school for graduate students

in Moscow and St. Petersburg, had to be canceled. Instead, we had a series of online guest lectures and colloquia. In October, Azhar Dyussekenova, a second-year Ph.D. student, presented her research project "Decolonial Practice in Contemporary Kazakhstani Art: Female Artists and Gender Tricksterism". In January, Dr. Eli Rosenblatt talked about Robert Magidoff's (Slavic Ph.D. 1963) anthology of African-American poetry in Yiddish translation at our MLK Colloquium (see pages 4-5). In March, we hosted a talk by Professor Ingrid Kleespies (University of Florida) titled "A Taste of Frontier Medicine: The Kumys Cure in Sergei Aksakov's Eastern Frontier Trilogy," and in April, Ania Aizman invited three guest speakers to her graduate seminar on Infantile Masculinities to give open presentations for the department. We are very pleased that Ania will stay with our department as a Michigan Society Fellow for one more year thanks to the generous support of MSF and LSA.

We congratulate Professors Sofya Khagi and Benjamin Paloff on their promotion to the rank of full professor. Professor Khagi's second monograph, *Pelevin and Unfreedom: Poetics, Politics, Metaphysics* (Northwestern University Press) came out in December 2020. *Culture and*

Communication: Signs in Flux (Academic Studies Press), a collection of articles by the prominent Russian scholar Yuri Lotman, translated by Professor Paloff and edited by our former colleague Andreas Schönle, was published in September 2020. We also congratulate Ewa Pasek, Ladislav Matějka Collegiate Lecturer, whose translation (jointly with Megan Thomas) of Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz's novel *The Career of Nicodemus Dyzma* won a prestigious award from the Polish Book Institute in Warsaw.

We look forward to a restful summer and hope that in the fall we will be able to see each other and our students in-person, and our department will again become the busy place it has always been.

Stay well,
Mikhail Krutikov

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mikhail Krutikov". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

highlights

Robert Magidoff, A Life between Cultures and Continents

By Mikhail Krutikov



Magidoff, around 1948.

The highlight of our colloquium series this year was the presentation by Dr. Eli Rosenblatt (Chicago) "To Travel a Different Road: The Translation of African-American Poetry into Yiddish, 1925-1936," which was part of the University-wide Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Symposium. Drawing on the extensive research he conducted as a fellow at U-M's Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies in 2019-20, Dr. Rosenblatt introduced the fascinating but completely forgotten figure of Robert Magidoff, a translator, a journalist, and a scholar of African-American poetry. Born in Kiev in 1905, Magidoff immigrated to the United States in 1922, and in 1932 graduated from the University of Wisconsin. In college, he became interested in African-American culture and, as Dr. Rosenblatt discovered, corresponded with W.E.B. DuBois. His

other interest was the Soviet Union and in 1935 Magidoff went to Moscow as a correspondent of the Associated Press and NBC. It was there that he published, in 1936, his pioneering anthology of African-American poetry in Yiddish translation. This book, titled *Negerdikhtung in Amerike* (Negro Poetry in America), remains to this day, according to Rosenblatt, the most extensive and intricately crafted corpus of African-Diasporic poetry in Yiddish translation. It is also different in its approach to the material. Whereas African-American culture did attract the interest of American Yiddish writers at that time, most of them focused on the parallels between antisemitic and anti-Black racist violence, Magidoff's approach foregrounds the aesthetic quality of the original. The book's literary editor was the prominent Soviet Yiddish poet Shmuel Halkin, which

indicates that this publication was an important project of the main Soviet Yiddish Press *Der Emes*. The anthology includes Magidoff's critical introduction and translations of nearly one hundred individual poems by twenty-nine poets, both men and women, from across the United States and the Caribbean. In his introduction, he outlines the development of African-American poetry, focusing on the genres of the spirituals and the Blues. Apart from the Yiddish anthology, Magidoff published two smaller collections of African-American poetry in Russian translation, published in New York and Moscow. As Rosenblatt convincingly concluded, "when placed alongside DuBois's and others' visits to the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the appearance of African-American poetry in Yiddish translation shows how a transatlantic Jewish avant-garde interpreted and embedded itself within

"While the real reason for his expulsion remained a mystery, other newsmen guessed that Magidoff might have been a stalking-horse in the Soviet campaign to clean up "impurity" in the arts."

Soviet-African-American contacts in between the two World Wars."

Robert Magidoff was a man of many talents and interests. As a native speaker of Russian, he was uniquely positioned for understanding the life of Soviet people and conveying it to an English-speaking audience. In 1937 he married

Nila Shevko, a Russian woman whose first husband had been arrested and executed during Stalin's Great Terror and thus, as they both believed, saved her from an inevitable arrest. After World War II he joined the McGraw-Hill Publishing Company and submitted dispatches for American radio and television from Moscow and other capitals of Eastern Europe that fell under Soviet control. And then, on April 15, 1948, the central Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* published a letter by Magidoff's secretary Cecilia Nelson, who claimed to have found among his papers some materials incriminating him in espionage. The Magidoffs were ordered to leave the Soviet Union within 48 hours, which they promptly did. *Time* magazine speculated about the reasons behind Magidoff's sudden expulsion: "While the real reason for his expulsion remained a mystery, other newsmen guessed that Magidoff might have been a stalking-horse in the Soviet campaign to clean up "impurity" in the arts. He had many friends among Russian writers and artists. Thus, branding him a spy would, later, make it easy to purge any writers he had known." Magidoff's case was featured prominently in the book *Truth about American Diplomats* (1949) by Annabelle Bucar, an officer at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow who married a Soviet operetta star and defected to the Soviet side. The book, which was apparently compiled by the Soviet intelligence service, portrayed Magidoff as a star spy capable of obtaining sensitive information using his broad network of connections among Soviet people. The prominent Soviet Ukrainian film director Aleksandr Dovzhenko began shooting a movie based on Bucar's book, but the production was soon stopped by Stalin. We of course do not know the truth behind this propa-



gandistic accusation, but it is clear that Magidoff was a well-known figure in the small community of Western diplomats and journalists in Moscow, and was chosen as one of the first victims of the Cold War's propaganda front.

Back in the U.S., Magidoff and his wife settled at Squam Lake, New Hampshire, where he supported his family by writing and giving occasional talks. Eleanor Roosevelt, who befriended the Magidoffs, recorded her impression in her diary on December 13, 1954: "Mr. Magidoff, of course, is always a source of interest for he knows so much about Russia, and who is not interested in Russia today?" Magidoff's first book, *In Anger and Pity - A Report on Russia* (1949), is an informative and entertaining personal account of his years in the Soviet Union and his dramatic expulsion, while his next book, *The Kremlin vs the People: The Story of the Cold Civil War in Stalin's Russia* (1953), is one of the first analytical studies of the Cold War. His interest in music is reflected in his next book, *Yehudi Menuhin: The Story of the Man and the Musician* (1955).

In 1958, at the ripe age of 53, Robert Magidoff decided to pursue a doctorate in Russian literature at our Slavic department which had just opened a Ph.D. Program. In Ann Arbor, both he and his wife led an active social life. Nila entertained Eleanor Roosevelt when she visited Ann Arbor in 1959 and gave a lecture at Rackham Auditorium titled "I Discover America," which was featured in the *Michigan Daily*. It took Magidoff about five years to complete his degree, and in 1963 he defended his thesis on *Imagery in the Prose of Boris Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago*. He became a professor of Russian literature at the New York University where he taught until his death in 1970. He published a *Guide to Russian Literature* as well as an anthology of Russian science fiction, which went through several editions.

Robert Magidoff was a true man of the world at the age when the world was turning against people like him. He lived and worked creatively in three languages, English, Russian and Yiddish, trying to overcome the growing ideological barriers by mediating between different cultures and countries.

staying connected

Opening Doors

By John A. Young, Senior Learning Development Officer (Protection), Protection Learning Unit
DHR Global Learning & Development Centre, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,
A.B. 1986, J.D. 1990

Russian language opened the door to my UNHCR career, as it enabled me to quickly learn Slovak, where I first joined UNHCR.



As a graduate and double major in 1986 in Russian East European Studies and Russian Language and Literature and University of Michigan Law in 1990, I have spent most of my career, since 1994, on refugee protection, mainly with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), engaged in refugee status determination, resettlement, migration, and assisting vulnerable cases. I have worked in Slovakia, Russia, Switzerland, Serbia, Belgium, Turkey, Iraq, and Hungary.

Arriving at U-M without a second language, I chose Russian, mainly because I was fascinated with Russian

classical music and literature. Learning to speak Russian was a very steep learning curve, and summer studies at Middlebury were helpful. Combined with Russian & East European Studies, I was able to devote my energies to topics of great interest and importance, perhaps making me an interesting candidate for law school. (Studying something one enjoys also leads to good transcripts.)

Russian language opened the door to my UNHCR career, as it enabled me to quickly learn Slovak, where I first joined UNHCR. My next post was in St. Petersburg, Russia, where I opened the first UN office in

1998. Being UN-certified in Russian has also helped me learn Serbian and Croatian, where I was able to communicate directly with the authorities and win their trust.

In sum, while not an easy path, studying Russian has opened the doors to a diverse and stimulating career and set of experiences. Perhaps more importantly, the submersion into the literature and culture has provided priceless insights into my self-understanding and worldview.

graduate focus

Congratulations

Double congratulations to Aleks Marciniak, Ph.D. candidate, recipient of a 2021 Rackham Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) Award and a 2021-22 Rackham Predoctoral Fellowship.



The Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor Award recognizes the efforts and accomplishments of GSIs who demonstrate extraordinary dedication and excellence as teachers. Svitlana Rogovyk, Slavic Language Program Director, nominated Aleks for the award. "Aleks, a talented and motivated instructor, serves as a guide, rather than a drillmaster, helping students recognize mistakes and improve skills while being conscious of the effect her teaching has on students. Teaching Russian is a challenge, but Aleks consistently demonstrates ingenuity, enthusiasm, and sensitivity." A student of Aleks's wrote:

"I had the privilege of having Aleks Marciniak as a GSI my freshman year of college. The class, Russian 101, was one that I had some reservations about, as Russian is a difficult and somewhat intimidating language. Now, I am a junior at U-M with a declared Russian major, enjoying every experience and opportunity in this wonderful discipline. I am sure that if I had not had such quality and impassioned instruction and guidance from Aleks, I would not be where or who I am today. As an instructor, Aleks remains to this day one of the best I have had at U-M. She entered every class, prepared, supportive, and above all excited about what she had come to teach. Her positive energy was infectious, ... The personal anecdotes she told us about her travels and experiences to Russia brought a real and captivating element to learning. Through her interactive and inclusive teaching strategies, she made the course material feel like something my classmates and I wanted to master together, and we did."

The Rackham Predoctoral Fellowship supports outstanding doctoral students who have achieved candidacy and are actively working on dissertation research and writing. Students are reviewed on overall academic performance, qualifying exams, and excellence of

their dissertation progress, especially the innovative nature of their thesis and methodology.

Aleks' dissertation-in-progress, *Boys will be Brands: Creating and Performing the Self in Russian Battle Rap*, is an innovative interdisciplinary project that addresses

such topical issues as the negotiation of identities and norms regarding gender, sexuality, and race. Her work on contemporary Russian battle rappers such as Roman Osminkin, Oxxxymiron, and Gnojny offers a new perspective on this important aspect of contemporary Russian cultural expression.

Welcome

During fall 2020, we welcomed new graduate students, Katie Kasperian and Tanya Silverman.



Katie Kasperian

Katie graduated from the University of Chicago in 2019 with a B.A. in History and Slavic Languages and Literature. Her current research interests are rather broad and include 20th-century Russian and Yugoslav exile literature, nationalism, memory studies, and museums. When not thinking about how we form our identities, she can be found

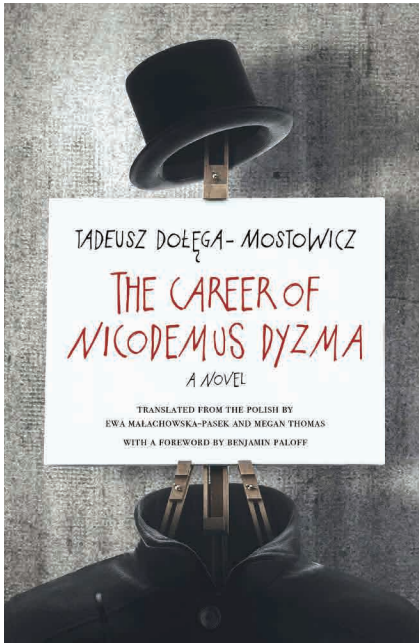
experimenting in the kitchen, trying out new coffee brewing methods, snuggling her cat, or, if you're lucky, extolling the virtues of watching Survivor.



Tanya Silverman

Tanya Silverman holds an M.A. in Central European Comparative Studies from Charles University in Prague and a B.A. in History from Binghamton University. Her research interests include Czech cinema and the influences of Czech literature on different cultural products. She enjoys traveling, hiking, and visiting museums.

faculty focus



The winner of the 2021 Found in Translation Award goes to...

The Polish Book Institute, the Polish Cultural Institute London, and the Polish Cultural Institute New York announced in early April 2021 that Ewa Małachowska-Pasek and Megan Thomas won the 2021 Found in Translation Award for *The Career of Nicodemus Dyzma* by Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz (Northwestern University Press, 2020). This is the single highest honor in the world specifically for Polish-to-English literary translation.

As Madeline G. Levine, one of the jurors of the FiTA 2021 edition says about the winners: "I am impressed by the skill and creativity with which this team of translators

[Ewa Małachowska-Pasek and Megan Thomas] has managed to produce such vibrant, varied and distinctive English performances of both the narrative voice and the multiple conversational exchanges in *The Career of Nicodemus Dyzma*. It is also a great service to bring this entertaining, clever, and still relevant novel to an Anglophone readership."

Ewa Pasek is the Ladislav Matejka Collegiate Lecturer in Polish and Czech Studies in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan. Congratulations on this well-deserved award!



Sofya Khagi publishes second monograph: Pelevin and Unfreedom: Poetics, Politics, Metaphysics by Patricia Kalosa, Executive Assistant to the Chair

Sofya Khagi's *Pelevin and Unfreedom: Poetics, Politics, Metaphysics* is the first book-length English-language study of Victor Pelevin, one of the most significant and popular Russian authors of the post-Soviet era. The text, published in December 2020, explores Pelevin's sustained Dostoevskian reflections on the philosophical question of freedom and his complex oeuvre and worldview, shaped by the idea that contemporary social conditions pervert that very notion. Khagi shows that Pelevin uses provocative and imaginative prose to model different systems of unfreedom, vividly illustrating how the present world deploys hyper-commodification and technological manipulation to promote human degradation and social deadlock. Rather than rehearse Cold War-era platitudes about totalitarianism, Pelevin holds

up a mirror to show how social control (now covert, yet far more efficient) masquerades as freedom and how eagerly we accept, even welcome, control under the techno-consumer system. He reflects on how commonplace discursive markers of freedom (like the *free* market) are in fact misleading and disempowering. Under this comfortably self-occluding bondage, the subject loses all power of self-determination, free will, and ethical judgment. In his work, Pelevin highlights the unprecedented subversion of human society by the techno-consumer machine. Yet, Khagi argues, however circumscribed and ironically qualified, he holds onto the emancipatory potential of ethics and even an emancipatory humanism.

Faculty Promotions

by Patricia Kalosa, Executive Assistant to the Chair

We are excited to announce the promotion of two Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures faculty, Sofya Khagi and Benjamin Paloff, from associate professor, with tenure, to professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures, with tenure.



Professor Sofya Khagi earned her Ph.D. from Brown University and joined the Slavic department in 2006. Professor Khagi teaches Russian literature, including specialized courses on particular genres, periods, and individual writers, covering the period of Russian literature from the 18th to the 21st century. She has contributed to the remodeling of some of the department's more traditional, philologically-oriented courses, while also offering original, new courses such as the undergraduate course on fantasy and science fiction, her iteration of the senior seminar in Russian, as well as an introductory course in the Baltic cultures.

Her first book, *Silence and the Rest: Verbal Skepticism in Russian Poetry*, now in its second edition, explores a particular philosophical tradition in Russian poetry, her second monograph, *Pelevin and Unfreedom: Poetics, Politics, Metaphysics*, is a detailed, wide-ranging, and penetrating study of Viktor Pelevin, one of Russia's most-read, most-discussed, and most contentious contemporary authors.



Professor Paloff earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University and joined the Slavic and Comparative Literature departments in 2007. Professor Paloff teaches several core courses in the Slavic department and is a sought-after mentor across many disciplines. Professor Paloff has deep expertise in the theory and practice of translation, on both the undergraduate and the graduate level. In the Slavic department, he has expanded the department's offerings in Polish literature to such an extent that the Polish program has been transformed.

special focus on the theory of translation. He has a distinct presence in the transnational scholarly discourse, making significant American contributions to local discourses in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Russia. His first monograph won two prestigious awards, from the American Association of comparative literature and the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages.

Professor Paloff's work spans Russian, Czech, and Polish literature, history, and culture, as well as literary theory, with a

in the classroom

Teaching Language During the Pandemic: Lessons Taught, and Lessons Learned

By *Svitlana Rogovyk, Lecturer and Language Program Director*

It has been a tough 14 months of living and working in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Now, being vaccinated and cautiously optimistic about “maskless” speaking, most of us language teachers, are asking the same question: what lies ahead for foreign language pedagogy? Though this sounds like a vague or even rhetorical question, there is one thing we know for sure—it is not going to be the same as it was before the worldwide pandemic. It will be better. Here is why:



1. The structural view.

By now, language instructors have learned how to explain grammatical structures of the foreign language without a blackboard. For instance, some teachers used the flipped classroom approach, wherein students pre-read rules in advance of class. Others found that screen sharing and incorporating tables, graphs, and other visuals were an efficient solution. Others still used virtual “breakout rooms,” allowing students to reverse roles with the teachers to explain and practice new grammatical structures with one another. These new techniques will not be abandoned as we collectively return to the traditional classroom experience; rather, they will be utilized to help reinforce existing in-person classroom methods.

2. The functional view.

Being able to function with an acquired knowledge of the language is one of the

core goals of our proficiency-oriented language program. Real-life situations and role plays in breakout rooms became our students’ favorite activities in the virtual classroom. Interestingly, I realized that some teaching approaches used in online language classrooms corresponded with the almost forgotten “old school” PPP (presentation, practice, and production) method, which was widely used in many foreign language textbooks until the 1980s. With this approach, most language functions and tasks were presented using common scenarios/situations. It goes without saying—that reviewing and recycling former experiences in language teaching method, would provide instructors with a broader perspective on how to help students not only acquire necessary knowledge but also how to develop and use collaborative skills to function with it.

3. The interactive view.

Unfortunately, this important language pedagogy principle was very tough to follow while teaching remotely. Due to the specifics of online work, the teacher is required to comment on the actions that the student must perform (for example, scroll down the text, look at the notes, see the picture on the screen, download the file, etc.) thereby increasing the teacher’s talking time. On the other hand, a variety of interactive tasks and handy online dictionaries help students interact with more confidence which makes the lesson more dynamic and exciting. Now, when we are back in our classrooms, the value of active participation most likely will be reinforced by instructors providing every opportunity for our students not to be called on to answer a single question but to create an inclusive classroom culture that enhances students’ active interaction.

Of course, there are many more important points on how to implement our best “teaching-during-pandemic” experiences into new approaches of language pedagogy, but the main takeaway is this: when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Adapting to new methods of language instruction required instructors to think creatively, experiment courageously, and remain relentless in their pursuit of teaching. I eagerly await our next academic year and look forward to our productive, professional interactions—regardless of whether they take place online or in the real classroom. Our students’ success in Slavic language learning will be our priority, as always.

undergraduate focus

Congratulations to our Graduates

Commencement is a time to celebrate the work students have done to earn their degree and the sacrifices made by both students and families. Due to the COVID pandemic, we held a Virtual Graduation Celebration to celebrate their hard work and many accomplishments.

In addition to the virtual ceremony, many of our graduates uploaded photos, added information about plans after graduation, and sent messages to fellow graduates. See Slavic's Facebook page, www.facebook.com/umslavic, and our website, lsa.umich.edu/slavic, for all the details.

Polish Majors

Joseph Blattert
Madeline Topor

Polish Minors

Anthony Cichocki
Emily Litynski
Shannon Murphy
Karolina Rak
Laura Scerbak
Emily Webber

Minors in Cultures & Literatures of Eastern Europe, East European Studies, and Central Eurasian Studies

Jangul Erlon-Baurjan
Qianli Dong
Monica Olszewski
Michael Machesky

Ukrainian Minors

Victoria Guevara
Anna Petrovskaya
Isabella Przybylska

Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian Language, Literature & Culture Minors

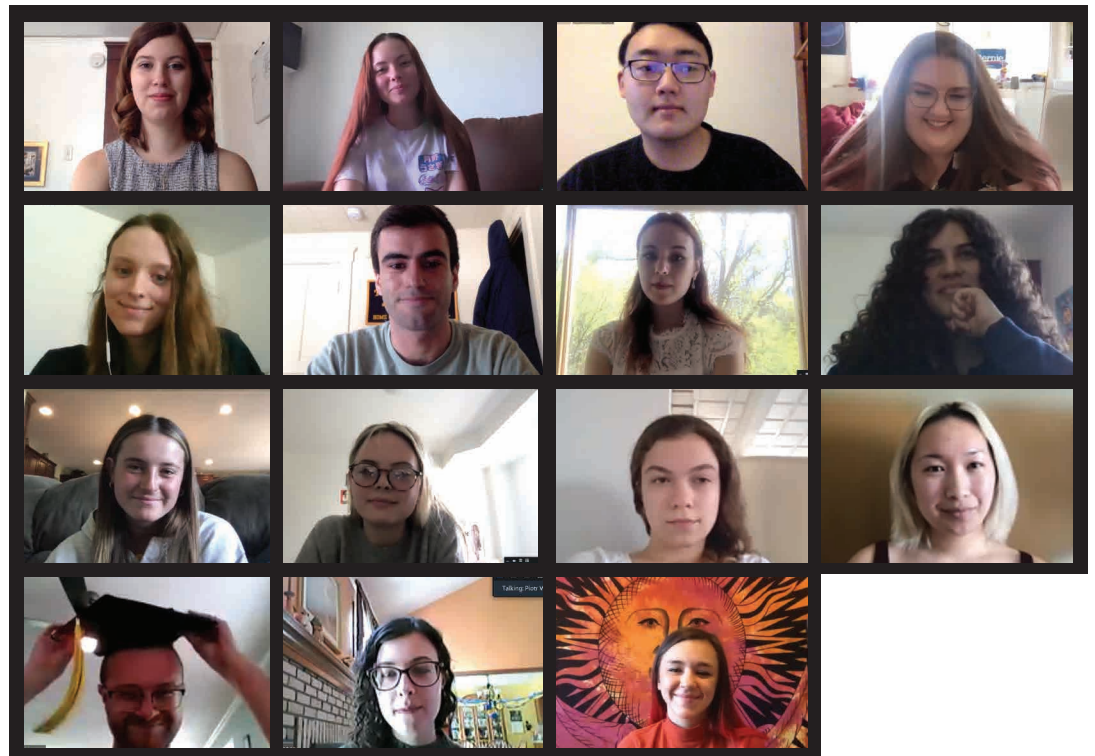
Hana Grebovic
Kaylee Hukarevic

Russian Majors

Jailene Acevedo
Kyle Arnashus
Benjamin Bronkema-Bekker
Miranda Campe
Kirena Dillon
Alexander Downs
Clarice Lacey
Rachael Merritt
Clare Murray
Liam O'Toole
Anna Petrovskaya
Madelyn Scarlett
Harrison Wladis

Russian Language, Literature & Culture Minors

Matthew Chan
Victoria Guevara
Tara Holz
Ellen Model
Philip Rapoport
Sumaya Tabbah
Maya Taleb Bendiab
Jason Van De Velde
Kennedy Wade



*Top Row (left to right): Clarice Lacey, Anna Petrovskaya, Benjamin Bronkema-Bekker, Clare Murray
Second Row: Madelyn Scarlett, Harrison Wladis, Kirena Dillon, Ellen Model
Third Row: Maya Taleb Bendiab, Kennady Wade, Isabella Przybylska, Victoria Guevara
Fourth Row: Joseph Blattert, Madeline Topor, Kaylee Hukarevic*

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Mostar Fairy tale city, Bosnia &
Herzegovina by Chronis Yan



Congratulations!

Haley Laurila successfully defended her dissertation in September 2020,
Chernobyl's Radioactive Memory: Confronting the Impact of Nuclear Fallout.
