



the  
**slavic scene**

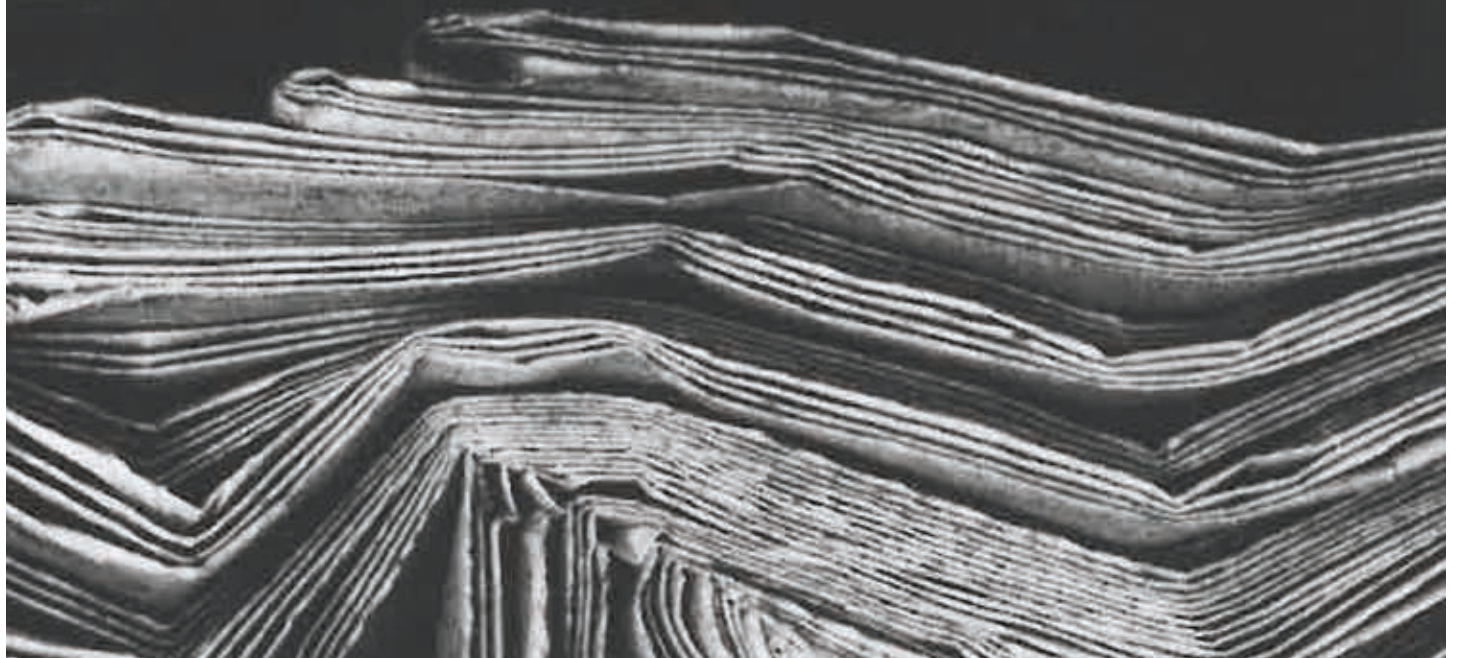
volume 30, spring 2019

*Photo by Maksym Harbar*

[lsa.umich.edu/slavic](http://lsa.umich.edu/slavic)

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# letter from the chair



Mikhail Krutikov

## Dear friends,

Winter term kept our department busy. Thanks to the dedicated work of our team of faculty, lecturers, graduate students and staff, our enrollment figures were slightly higher than the previous year, defeating the overall negative trend in the study of foreign languages. We remain one of the very few departments nationally to offer continuously five Slavic languages. And this year we had 17 students graduating with degrees in Russian, Polish, Czech and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian.

Our Ukrainian program keeps growing, and this Winter term we held a series of events focusing on Ukraine's past and present. In March, Professor Vitaly Chernetsky from the University of Kansas gave a talk on the language politics in contemporary Ukrainian cinema as part of the CREES lecture series, and discussed the fascinating new novel *Felix Austria* by the young Ukrainian author Sophia Andrukhoanych at our departmental colloquium. March 31 was the day of the presidential elections in Ukraine, and we invited two of our alumni to share their experience of working in Ukraine and to reflect on the situation in that country in the aftermath of that event. The panel was integrated into the mini-course, *Cultures of Ukraine*, which was taught

by Eugene Bondarenko, but was also open to the general public. In April, we had a fortunate occasion to celebrate the publication of a new book by our Professor Emerita Assya Humesky.

Responding to the growing interest of our students and faculty in film, we invited Igor Gulin, the book review editor of the Moscow *Kommersant Weekend* newspaper, to share his research on the Soviet cinema of the so-called "stagnation" period at our departmental colloquium in February.

Over the past few years, we have been making a concerted effort to promote our graduate program and to expand diversity among our graduate students. This year the number of applications to our Ph. D. program grew exponentially, and we are now preparing to welcome a new cohort of five graduate students, two of whom are coming from Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. We keep working on developing our ties with peer institutions abroad, such as the University of Regensburg in Germany and the Russian Academy for National Economy and Public Administration. Professor Marek Nekula from Regensburg will teach a graduate seminar titled *Performing Memory:*

*Cultures of Memory in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989*, and, jointly with the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences and the European University at St. Petersburg, we are planning a new graduate program in Russian culture for summer 2020.

We congratulate Professor Benjamin Paloff on his 2018 Prize for Best Book in Literary Scholarship *Lost in the Shadow of the Word: Space, Time, and Freedom in Interwar Eastern Europe* awarded by the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. My own book, *Der Nister's Soviet Years: Yiddish Writer as Witness to the People*, has just come out in May. As I prepare for my research leave from September 2019 through May 2020, I look forward to returning to my position as chair next summer.

# highlights

## Which Revolution?: Ukraine Five Years Later

By Mikhail Krutikov, Chair

People of Ukraine have elected an unusual but apparently very popular man as their new president. Volodymyr Zelensky is a popular television personality best known for his series *Servant of the People* where he plays an ordinary school teacher who gets unexpectedly elected as Ukraine's president. Few people would have guessed that exactly the same would happen with the actor as with his character, and yet it has happened. In the second round of the elections, Zelensky defeated the incumbent Petro Poroshenko taking over 70% of the vote. We certainly had not been able to predict this result, yet we could rightly anticipate that the elections would generate a great deal of suspense and excitement. So, we decided to invite two of our alumni, Mark Dillen

and Jessica Zychowicz, who have worked in Ukraine and studied the country, to share their expertise with our students and the general public. Mark Dillen (BA (cum laude) in Russian and East European Studies) had a distinguished career in the U.S. Foreign Service, managing media and cultural relations for U.S. embassies in Rome, Berlin, Moscow, Sofia, and Belgrade, as well as for the USAID Mission in Kabul and for a White House initiative, Power Africa. Most recently, he was a Fulbright Scholar in Ukraine, teaching a course on U.S. news media to graduate students at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. Jessica Zychowicz (Ph. D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures) is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Contemporary Ukraine Studies Program at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at

University of Alberta. She was recently a U.S. Fulbright Scholar based at Kyiv-Mohyla University. Her monograph, *Superfluous Women: Feminism, Art, and Revolution in 21st Century Ukraine* is forthcoming at University of Toronto Press.

The panel took place on April 4, four days after the first round of the elections, when it had become clear that Zelensky was a likely winner. The panel was integrated into the mini-course Cultures of Ukraine taught by Eugene Bondarenko and made open to the general public. The conversation touched upon many different matters in contemporary life and politics in Ukraine. How important are the issues of religion, language, and defense against the Russian aggression, which Poroshenko made the key

points of his campaign? What was the situation of women, ethnic minorities, LGBT people in Ukrainian society? Are there deep political and cultural divisions among different regions of the country? Understandably, some questions from students addressed parallels between American and Ukrainian political cultures, but some were quite unexpected, demonstrating the broad international diversity of U-M students — such as, would Ukraine be willing to take part in the grandiose Chinese Belt and Road initiative, and could China help resolve the conflict in Donbas? It was a very memorable event which brought, for two hours, Ukraine live to Ann Arbor.



Mark Dillen and Jessica Zychowicz answer questions during their panel discussion with Mikhail Krutikov

# Reflections on my Love of Languages and Literatures: A Ukrainian Literary Evening with Professor Assya Humesky

By Ruth Shamraj, MA, Russian and East European Studies



Assya Humesky, photos by Matt Grossman

On April 17, 2019, the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures held a Ukrainian Literary Evening featuring Professor Emerita Dr. Assya Humesky. Assya was on the faculty from 1953 to 1998. Although today Professor Humesky is best known for teaching Ukrainian language and literature, early in her career she laid a solid foundation for Russian studies within the Department, teaching many of the Russian language and literature courses.

Professor Humesky is a renowned scholar of Ukrainian language and literature. She authored *Modern Ukrainian* (1980), a widely used book on Ukrainian grammar, and published numerous articles on Ukrainian literature (see her *Selected Works [Vybrani filolohichni pratsi]*, 2017)). She also coauthored two Russian language textbooks: *Modern Russian I* (1964) and *II* (1965). From 1953 to 1969, she taught only Russian language and literature courses. She

began teaching Ukrainian language and literature courses in 1969.

Born in Kharkiv, Ukraine, Assya grew up speaking both Ukrainian and Russian, “which was typical for the Ukrainian intelligentsia.” In the United States in graduate school, Assya studied linguistics with Roman Jakobson and Ukrainian language and literature with Dmytro Chyzhevsky (*A History of Ukrainian Literature*, 1975), and Church Slavonic with Horace Lunt. Her Ph.D. dissertation was a comparison of the neologisms of the Russian poets Vladimir Majakovsky and Igor Severyanin. She earned her Ph.D. from Harvard in 1955.

Assya shared poignant moments from her life to show how languages, words, and pronunciation have influenced her. Her father Serhiy Pylypenko, a writer, “was my first teacher.” He taught her to read Ukrainian. In 1933, when Assya was 9 years old, her father was arrested and charged with

being an “enemy of the people.” He was sentenced to be executed and the family never heard from him again.

Assya and her mother (Tatiana Kardinalowska) and sister (Mirtala) were exiled from Ukraine for 10 years and moved to the Russian town of Kalinin. There, Assya studied German in school, learning how to spell and write, but not to speak it.

Her family secretly returned to Ukraine 5 years later, settling in Vinnytsia, where Assya attended high school. Hitler invaded and occupied Ukraine in 1941 when Assya was 16 years old. She interpreted Ukrainian into German in the *Eier und Geflügel Kontor* (Office of Eggs and Poultry), which requisitioned farm products from Ukrainian peasants. The Nazis deported thousands of young Ukrainians, mostly girls, to work in factories and farms. The same fate also befell Assya. Tatiana, who was afraid she would never see her daughter again, boarded the train of

deportees to Austria that Assya was on, bringing her sister too.

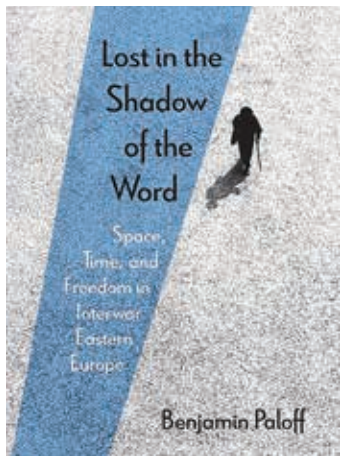
Assya worked for a time as a housemaid, but was later sent to work in a labor camp near Graz, Austria, where they made airplane parts for Treiber. There she learned to converse in French with university students who were deported from Lyon, France, to do forced labor.

Convinced that the advancing Soviets would send them to Siberia for working for the enemy, Assya, Tatiana, and Mirtala escaped from Trieber, ending up in a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Aversa, Italy. Assya began learning English from an English-Russian dictionary given to her by an Italian POW who had been stationed in her hometown, Kharkiv. He had salvaged the dictionary from a pile of books the Nazis had thrown into the street to burn and he gave it to Assya when they met. *Members of the Ann Arbor Michigan Ukrainian community helped organize this event.*



# faculty focus

## Benjamin Paloff awarded 2018 AATSEEL Prize for Best Book in Literary Scholarship



The cover of Benjamin Paloff's book *Lost in the Shadow of the Word*

Associate Professor Benjamin Paloff was awarded the 2018 Prize for Best Book in Literary Scholarship by the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL) for his book, *Lost in the Shadow of the Word: Space, Time, and Freedom in Interwar Eastern Europe* (Northwestern University Press, 2016).

"In this brilliant, wide-ranging, and deeply original work, Benjamin Paloff analyzes the theme of intermediacy in the works and lives of some of the greatest writers of modern Polish, Russian, and

Czech literature. Looking closely at shared tropes of homelessness, orphanhood, naivety, metamorphosis, immaturity, and doubling in Bruno Schultz, Andrei Platonov, Osip Mandelstam, Czeslaw Milosz, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Karel Capek, Witold Gombrowicz, and others, Paloff sees a specifically Eastern European modernism, often associated with Kafka, in which the promise of freedom in time and space, paradoxically, is equally desired and feared. Utilizing the skills of the best comparativists - fluency in several languages and

literary traditions, exhaustive research into the various local scholarly traditions, and a thorough knowledge of modern philosophy and literary theory – Paloff brilliantly reveals a poetics of metaphysical unfreedom in Eastern European modernist literature. His subtle argument is a crucial contribution that will, without a doubt, resonate with scholars and readers." - AATSEEL.org

## 2019-20 Frankel Institute Fellow – Mikhail Krutikov

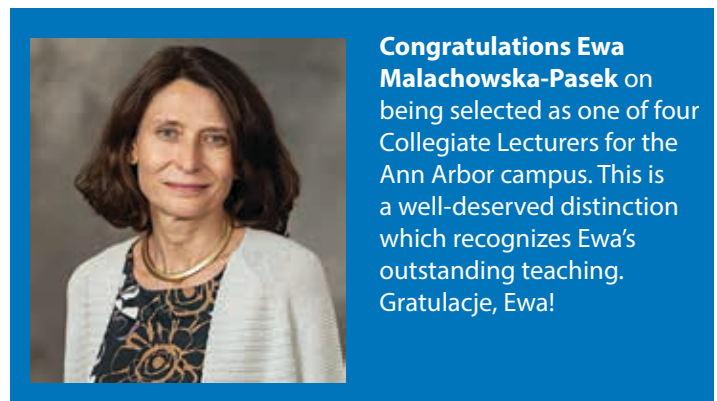
This fall, the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies will bring together a group of Yiddish scholars, poets, translators, language teachers, and cultural leaders to discuss and research around the theme of "Yiddish Matters."

The University of Michigan has emerged as one of the world's leading centers for Yiddish studies, so it is fitting that the Frankel Institute will be a site for fresh explorations

of the linguistic, literary, historical, political, and social significance of the language and the varying cultures it has engendered and continues to animate.

Among the esteemed scholars invited to be a Frankel Fellow include Professor Mikhail Krutikov. His field of research includes his book titled *Urban Space in Jewish Literature(s)*.

*Provided by the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies*



**Congratulations Ewa Malachowska-Pasek** on being selected as one of four Collegiate Lecturers for the Ann Arbor campus. This is a well-deserved distinction which recognizes Ewa's outstanding teaching. Gratulacje, Ewa!

## Der Nister's Soviet Years: From Symbolist Roots to Social Realism

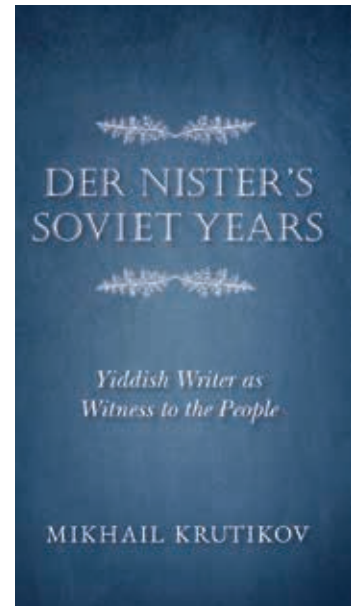
By Mikhail Krutikov, Professor, Russian and Judaic Studies

My first encounter with the legacy of the enigmatic Soviet Yiddish author Der Nister ("The Recluse", the penname of Pinhas Kahanovich (1884–1950)) was back in 1990, when I was asked to help with cataloguing his papers at the Russian State Archive for Literature and Arts in Moscow. Since then I kept returning to his work, publishing articles, giving talks, and preparing the Russian translation of his magisterial novel *The Family Mashber* for publication. A few years ago, I decided to put all these materials together and turn them into a monograph.

*Der Nister's Soviet Years* focuses on the second half of Der Nister's dramatic writing career after his return to Soviet Ukraine from emigration in Germany in 1926. It follows Der Nister's painful but ultimately successful literary transformation from his symbolist roots to social realism under severe ideological pressure from Soviet critics and authorities. The last chapter reveals how profoundly Der Nister was affected by the destruction of Jewish life during World War II and his own personal

misfortunes. While Der Nister was writing an epic saga of his generation, he was arrested for anti-government activities and died tragically from a botched surgery in the Gulag. As I try to argue, Der Nister's work is important to understandings of Soviet literature, the Russian Revolution, and the catastrophic demise of the Jewish community under Stalin.

**Right Photo**  
The cover of Mikhail Krutikov's book *Der Nisters Soviet Years*



## The Poor Rhymes of Hooligans: The Anarchist Aesthetics of OBERIU and Pussy Riot

By Ania Aizman, Assistant Professor and Michigan Society Fellow



My new article, "The Poor Rhymes of Hooligans: The Anarchist Aesthetics of OBERIU and Pussy Riot" can be found in the January 2019 issue of the *Russian Review*. It is part of a book project exploring how Russian artists, writers, and thinkers engaged with anarchist ideas and practices. The article abstract reads as follows: In August 2012, having been found guilty of "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred," Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot delivered a closing statement in which she argued that her group's performances are part of a

canon of nonconformism and dissent – from Aristotle, to Jesus, to the Soviet dissidents. But she singled out an obscure early Soviet absurdist, Alexander Vvedensky, whose "poor rhyme" aesthetic she compared at length to the anarchist style of Pussy Riot. Her extended discussion of Vvedensky inspires this paper's analysis. Contrary to recent scholarship that has suggested that Vvedensky and his literary circle, OBERIU, cultivated reactionary, conservative politics, I argue that they draw from anarchist (i.e. leftist) principles. Instead of seeking to communicate

artistic mastery, or advocating utopian paradigms and transcendent knowledge, the Oberiuty sought to suspend the search for absolutes and to cultivate spontaneity. The final portion of this essay contextualizes Tolokonnikova's interpretation and appropriation of Vvedensky in the rediscovery and reception of the OBERIU by leftist artists, writers, and philosophers.

# graduate focus

## Postdoctoral Research Fellow

By Alena Aniskiewicz, Ph.D. Student



I am very happy to have accepted a position as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Michigan Institute for the Humanities (2019-2020). At the Institute, I will continue work begun on my dissertation, "Cultural Remix: Polish Hip-Hop and the Sampling of Heritage." The project analyzes Polish hip-hop's engagement with the texts and traditions of Polish Romantic poets. Considering how the nineteenth-century poet Adam Mickiewicz becomes refigured as a forefather of Polish rap, I argue that hip-hop offers a space for Polish artists to engage and critique the narratives of their

nation's past. In referencing a Romantic nationalism born of statelessness, the Polish artists I study offer a nationally-specific performance of hip-hop's conventional critical, anti-establishment stance, unique here in its affirmation of a traditional national discourse. As I revise the project for publication as a book manuscript, I welcome the opportunity to discuss my research with the interdisciplinary cohort of Institute Fellows.

Related to "Cultural Remix" and in concert with the Institute's 2019-2020 theme of migration and immigration, I will also lead a UROP

(Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program) project on hip-hop as a voice of displacement and community around the world. I look forward to mentoring a team of undergraduate researchers in a collaborative and cross-cultural study of the genre as a record of immigrant experiences and global population flows. In Winter 2020, I will offer a course on "Voicing History and Community in Global Hip-Hop," which will explore similar topics of how hip-hop offers artists and fan communities a language with which to articulate their pasts and visions for the future.

## Rackham Predoctoral Fellow



**Congratulations** to Haley Laurila who will be a Rackham Predoctoral Fellow for the 2019-20 academic year. The Rackham Predoctoral Fellowship is one of the most prestigious awards granted by the Rackham Graduate School. Doctoral candidates who expect to graduate within six years since beginning their degrees are eligible to apply. Awards are based on the strength and quality of dissertation abstracts, publications and presentations, and recommendations.

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### Opposite Page From Left to Right

*BCS Minors* Nejra Malanovic and Allison Radman with Marija Rosic; *Czech Minor* Michael McGrath with Ewa Pasek; Michael Makin with *Russian Majors* Mikayla Easley and Amelia Fueka; *Polish Minors* Michael Lichowski and Izabella Puchalski with Piotr Westwalewicz; Michael Makin with *Russian Minors* Jason Dean and Eleanor Zinn



# undergraduate focus

## Critical Language Scholarships Awardees

by Aleks Marciniak, Ph.D. Student



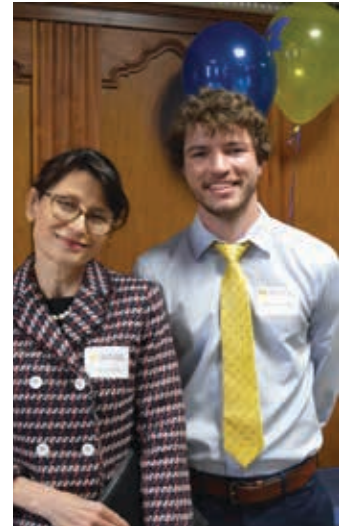
Rachael Merritt (top left) and Dominique Johnson (top right) - rising juniors - enrolled in the same Russian 101 class in the Fall of 2017. Now, they share another experience: both secured highly competitive Critical Language Scholarships to study in Russia this summer. The Critical Language Scholarship program (CLS), funded by the U.S. Department of State, will allow Rachael and Dominique to study Russian in an immersive environment amongst other dedicated American students. Below, they share their thoughts about their accomplishments and hopes for the program.

"This summer, I am beyond excited to be traveling to Russia for the very first time with the CLS program. I will be living with a host family and studying in Nizhny Novgorod for eight weeks. I am looking forward to trying authentic Russian сметана (real sour cream), putting to use all the Russian idioms I



know, and appreciating, first hand, the cultural diversity that we learn so much about in Russian class." - Rachael Merritt

"With the Critical Language Scholarship, I will be experiencing a fully immersive Russian language program this summer. I will be studying Russian at the KORA Russian Language Center in Vladimir, Russia. Classroom study will be about four hours a day, five days a week. I will also be participating in various cultural activities to gain a breadth of experience with Russian culture. While in Russia, I will be living with a Russian host family that will provide conversational practice every day. I am very excited about having the opportunity to explore important Russian historical sites and learn more about the history of Vladimir, Russia. Overall, I am thrilled to be able to learn more about a different culture and make new friends along the way." - Dominique Johnson



## Congratulations, Graduates!



# in the classroom

## Reexamining Modern Russia

By Christopher Fort, Ph.D. Student

Over the last half decade Americans who follow the news have discovered that the space of the former Soviet Union is populated by more than just Russians. From the Ukrainian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian oligarchs, with whom Trump makes friends, to the Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, whose missing cat HBO's Jon Oliver found, to Russia's continuing war in Ukraine, it seems like every week the American news media finds itself explaining the post-Soviet world's heterogeneity to the American public.

This shift of focus in popular media and in the field of Russian studies itself from Russians to non-Russians prompted my decision to diversify the curriculum for our department's course "Russia Today." In my version of the course, I focus attention

on how non-Russian writers articulate their current struggles in view of Russia's history of colonialism, Russification, and socialism. The course begins with an in-depth look at how the Soviet Union constructed itself as an anti-imperial empire, intending to use affirmative action and other tools to compensate non-Russians for their oppression under the Romanov Empire. We discuss how the contradiction between these noble ideals and their pitiful realization led, in part, to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. We then take our knowledge of this history to analyze current issues in four locales of the former Soviet Union, encapsulated in four units. We retain a discussion of the Chechen wars from previous versions of the course, but we push that discussion further through

our reading of up-and-coming Dagestani author Alisa Ganieva's *The Mountain and the Wall* (2014), a novel which portrays the Caucasus as a dialogic dystopia in which disputes over history, memory, and authenticity are unresolvable. We then turn to the Russian Far East, reading Chukchi author Yuri Rytkheiu's take on the transformation of his people and their spiritual traditions under Russian imperial and Soviet rule in his *The Chukchi Bible* (2011). From there, we go south to Central Asia and examine contemporary Uzbek writer Hamid Ismailov's Marquezian epic *The Railroad* (2006), a novel centered around a fictional Uzbek town in which accidents and mistakes undermine all utopian dreams. Finally, we address the war in Ukraine through Sergey Loznitsa's recent film *Donbass* (2018).

That film examines the current war as a theater in which the participants are not combatants on the battlefield but actors who, through broadcast media and the internet, create and maintain faraway audiences.

With this course, I hope to round out students' view of Russia and show them that, while many of the people we examine in the course may be far from the halls of power in Moscow, their activities on the periphery often transform politics at the center. This will be both my first and my last solo-taught course as a graduate student in the department, but I plan to make my materials accessible for future teachers in the department who may want to take up and expand upon them.

**Below Photo**  
Christopher Fort in his course "Russia Today"



# staying connected

## Intersecting Science and Language

By Yimeng Zhao, 2018, BS Biochemistry (Honors) & Russian

As a graduate of the University of Michigan in biochemistry and Russian, I have always entertained the possibility of using my degrees simultaneously instead of living two separate academic lives. Once I learned of the Fulbright U.S. Student Program as an avenue I could use to combine my love for medical science research with my Russian studies, I applied in hope to return to St. Petersburg where I had studied the year prior. Now, it is my pleasure to share that throughout the 2019-2020 academic year, I will be completing a Fulbright Research Fellowship in Russia in order to study HIV/MDR-TB co-infection at the St. Petersburg Institute of Phthisiopulmonology.

During the nine-month grant period, I will be working under the mentorship of Dr. Zinaida Zagdyn to study the rehabilitation of HIV-positive patients afflicted with multidrug-resistant strains of tuberculosis, in addition to the socioeconomic and cultural factors preventing early diagnosis and treatment. This fellowship offers the valuable opportunity not only to use my Russian proficiency in a professional setting, but also to apply myself in work on the intersection of two critical epidemics.

Looking back at my time in the Slavic Department at the University of Michigan, I had the privilege to work with faculty mentors who helped develop my interests before I had even learned the Cyrillic alphabet and supported me on the path that ultimately led me to the Fulbright. Initially, my interest in Russian literature sparked in a survey course my sophomore year and caught fire in 20th century Russian Modernism. The tinder—the Silver Age poet Alexander Blok. While I could parse thematic naturalism from a translation of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, poetry was different. Upon hearing my professor dramatically recite Blok's "Night, street, lamp, drugstore..." in its original language, I understood. The color of the piece could only be captured in its original tongue.

Two summer intensive courses, two months studying abroad, and one FLAS fellowship later, I found myself in a graduate level Russian class my senior year and realized that after graduation I could not simply walk away from what had become an intellectual jewel of my education. In university, at the side of the fencing strip between rounds of competition, I sat with Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and read of an attempt to maintain



spiritual independence under the communist regime. During nights of confocal imaging, I analyzed data while intermittently revisiting Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* which draws parallels to the author's own career under suffocating Soviet censorship. I often look to these readings and the tragic legacies of their authors to inform my grasp of human suffering and persistence. In the lines of Blok I have known despondency, and from Bulgakov, I have learned obstinate resolve.

In this way the Fulbright allows me to take steps to pursue my dream of becoming a physician scientist without rendering my language studies professionally obsolete, and for that I am eternally grateful. I would like to thank those at the Slavic department for mentoring me tirelessly and introducing me to the world of Russian language and literature.

**Above Photo**  
Yimeng Zhao at graduation  
in 2018



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**We'd love to hear from you!**

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Let us know where you are and what you are doing!



us on Facebook!