

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

ЗАПИСКИ ИЗ ПОДПОЛЬЯ

THE ANNUAL NEWSLETTER OF
THE BOWDOIN COLLEGE
RUSSIAN DEPARTMENT

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Greetings to all friends of Russian at Bowdoin!

Wherever you find yourself, we hope you are staying healthy and making the most of these late summer days. This past weekend we happily celebrated the return of the Class of 2020 to campus for their long-overdue commencement, and as I write, we are now busy getting ready to welcome the Class of 2025. It will be a busy year, with more students on campus than ever before. Before putting 2020-21 behind us, however, we wanted to share with you some of its highlights; as this newsletter indicates, for all the unique challenges, it was also a year of impressive accomplishments. On behalf of all of us in the Russian program – Reed Johnson, Mira Nikolova, Laura Henry, and Sandy Kauffman – I want to say how very proud we are of our students, for both the positive and collaborative spirit they brought to the classroom (remotely and in-person!), and the passion and imagination they have shown towards their learning and research. Their resilience has been stunning.

We can't wait to welcome ALL students back to campus in early September, especially our five newly declared majors. In the meantime, congratulations to our fabulous grads from the Class of 2021 and 2020 – we miss you already, so please stay in touch!

Page Herringer, Chair



CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR CLASS OF '21 MAJORS!

This year, the Russian Department graduated three exceptional Russian majors: **Kate Davidson**, **Evan Marrow**, and **Justin Winschel**. **Поздравляем!**



Prize for Excellence in Russian Language and Literature

This prize, established in 2002 by Jane Knox, professor of Russian emerita, is awarded to a graduating senior who has achieved distinction as a Russian major.

Awardees:

Kate Davidson
Evan Marrow



Russian Scholar Laureate

This award, given by the American Council of Teachers of Russian, recognizes the best qualities of a post-secondary Russian student: an unflinching love for all things Russian; a passion for the language, literature, and culture; a commitment to excellence; and an enthusiasm for knowledge and cultural literacy. Nomination for this national honor is a testament to the high esteem in which the Department of Russian holds the student.

Awardee:

Justin Winschel

Kate Davidson also wrote an honors thesis under advisor **Professor Laura Henry**, *The United States' and United Kingdom's Responses to 2016 Russian Election Interference: Through the Lens of Bureaucratic Politics*, summarized here:

In *The United States' and United Kingdom's Responses to 2016 Russian Election Interference: Through the Lens of Bureaucratic Politics*, Katherine Davidson assesses the policy formation process in the United States and United Kingdom in response to Russian disinformation in the 2016 US Presidential and UK Brexit elections using a bureaucratic politics framework. Focusing on the role of sub-state organizations, the paper identifies challenges to establishing an effective policy response to foreign disinformation, particularly in the emergence of leadership and bargaining, and the impact of centralization of power in the U.K. Discussion of the shift in foreign policy context since the end of the Cold War, which provided a greater level of foreign policy consensus, as well as specific challenges presented by the cyber deterrence context, supplements insights from bureaucratic politics. Despite different governmental structures, both countries struggled to achieve collaborative and systematic policy processes; analysis reveals the lack of leadership and coordination in the United States and both the lack of compromise and effective fulfillment of responsibilities in the United Kingdom. Particular challenges of democracies responding to exercises of sharp power by authoritarian governments point to the need for a holistic response from public and private entities and better definition of intelligence agencies' responsibility to election security in the U.K.

FACULTY NEWS

As some of you may have already heard, **Professor Alyssa Gillespie** has left the College after five years as chair of the Russian program. A true Stakhanovite with a heart as big as Russia, Professor Gillespie put tremendous effort, warmth, and creativity into everything she did both in and outside of the classroom. She was also a tireless advocate for her students, and always looking for every opportunity to make learning about Russian language, literature, and culture fun and engaging. Until the pandemic temporarily limited our options, the Russian calendar has been packed with a rich menu of speakers, musical performers, and cultural events, as well as annual Russian dinners and semester-end parties. A recent highlight was the spring 2020 trip Professor Gillespie led to New York City to experience Russian culture there. Her support has also helped many students pursue study abroad and receive awards in the field, including the coveted Fulbright and ACTR essay contest.



Professor Gillespie's impact on Russian at Bowdoin, has been, in a word, transformative. On behalf of all of us in Russian, I want to express profound gratitude for all that she has done to support and develop the program. We promise to make the most of the strong foundation she has built for us!

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If you would like to pass on a message to Professor Gillespie, feel free to send a letter to the Russian department and we will make sure it gets to her – or send us a quick email at pherrlin@bowdoin.edu and we'll put you in touch. For now, let's wish her well as she sets off on new adventures!

REED JOHNSON



In our last newsletter, I reflected on my first year at Bowdoin and expressed the optimistic sentiment that our lives, and the lives of our students on campus, would soon return to a certain pre-COVID normal. Much has changed in that time, but these remain anything but normal times. In addition to the upheavals of a worldwide pandemic, there was the upheaval of the racial reckoning in the wake of the killings of Black Americans like George Floyd (see the department's statement of solidarity on our website), and the fraught period during and following this year's elections. Throughout this turmoil, we struggled with technological and pedagogical challenges of online teaching alongside our students, who gamely soldiered through the fall semester and—even more impressively!—continued their rapid acquisition of the Russian language via Zoom. By the spring semester, our non-first year students returned to campus, and with them came the possibility of teaching in person. True, we still had to wear masks, which made communication at times difficult, but I think we all learned to enunciate our case endings

through the masks—not bad practice for some! I am looking forward to this coming year, when we can welcome all students back at the same time. In addition to teaching two courses from last year, I'm introducing a new course, one cross-listed with English, that studies the Russian short story from the point of view of narrative techniques and structure, with students responding both analytically and creatively (with their own stories) to these masterworks of Russian literature. The course is an experiment, but this year we've all gotten used to taking risks and trying out new things. Here's to a better year ahead—though this time, I'm not making any predictions.

MIRA NIKOLOVA



Perhaps most Bowdoin alums can attest that returning to campus after any time away is an experience as exhilarating and unique as it is comforting and familiar. The campus remains timeless: the Chapel and the Bricks still define the silhouette of the Quad, and memories of late nights in the Language Media Center or Smith Union quickly resurface as you walk around. If you return in the winter, the cold air feels like a slightly annoying old friend who welcomes you back right away. Nevertheless, there is an element of defamiliarization- or, to use the beloved Russian formalist term, *ostranenie* - during these moments, too. Little nooks of campus have changed here and there, and big projects and construction work have emerged, reminding us that our Bowdoin continues to grow.

This is certainly how I felt when I returned last year as a Visiting Lecturer in the Russian Department. The global pandemic and all adjustments we had to make as a result added to the sense of *ostranenie*. They did not take away

from the excitement I felt, however. I was thrilled and grateful to be back as a lecturer in the department that had been my academic home in college. While we weren't able to have in-person instruction in the classrooms of Sills Hall that I missed so much, we still learned, connected with others, and were part of the supportive Russian Department community even over Zoom. I taught Elementary Russian I and II, my favorite language level to teach as an instructor, and I was initially nervous about conducting it entirely online. Once I met the students, however, that quickly dissipated. What makes Bowdoin special are precisely the students. Their enthusiasm, dedication, and intellectual curiosity could be felt through the screen, and they remained unwavering throughout the year.

Additionally, Bowdoin provided everyone with tools such as a personal iPad device (and a pencil, too, so Russian cursive writing continued uninterrupted!) and various resources for faculty to adapt to this rather futuristic and perhaps a tad dystopian format of learning. The circumstances of the pandemic also made for many interesting and lively discussions of literary characters during the spring course on Dostoevsky and Tolstoy I taught. After all, we could all relate just a bit more strongly to Dostoevsky's characters like the Dreamer and even the Underground Man, isolated in his cellar and disconnected from the external world. The world of 19th-century Russian literature became a bit closer and more relevant to us, and this was echoed by the students in their insightfully written Op-Ed assignments.

As an instructor (and an alumna), I couldn't be more grateful to have had such a positive teaching experience during this challenging, unusual, and "defamiliarized" year. I am excited to now plan for this coming fall and a new academic year. We are a few short weeks away from welcoming everyone back to campus for on-site learning and programs, and I look forward to meeting many of the smiling faces from Zoom calls in person! Plans and ideas about Russian hours, film screenings, guest speakers, and resuming in-person office hours are in full swing. I certainly hope alums and friends of our Russian Department community will not hesitate to stop by as well and experience the thrill and *ostranenie* of being back!

NEWS FROM OUR CURRENT MAJORS

This year, Bowdoin's Russian Department has been distinguished with not one, but two recipients of the prestigious Mellon Mays Fellowship, **Shandiin Largo '23 and Colby Santana '23**. As part of this fellowship, both students participated in an intensive summer institute on Bowdoin's campus to hone their research skills and develop a prospectus for a project or thesis to be worked on over their remaining two years at Bowdoin. Here is a brief description provided by the fellowship recipients of their projects:

SHANDIIN LARGO:

My research looks into the relationship between settler colonialism and Indigenous peoples in the Siberian Arctic and the United States Southwest. Specifically, I am interested in dispelling the dehumanizing and exploitative narratives and perspectives that have been formed by Western academics in fields like anthropology and history for centuries. I plan on deconstructing the myth of pan-Indianism-- the idea that Indigenous peoples worldwide do not have distinct cultural, linguistic



and historical identities even when these groups inhabit vastly different geographical spaces and social environments-- by decentering eurocentrism in film and literature to create space for Indigenous self-representations. In this way, my research will demonstrate how settler colonialism has negatively affected Indigenous land, people, culture, and language. My research will also give a platform to the ongoing resiliency, perseverance, and beauty of Indigenous cultures and peoples today.



COLBY SANTANA:

My research centers on the holy fool: a historical and cultural character stemming from Eastern Orthodoxy that utilizes feigned madness to expose the insanity of societal institutions. The holy fool is a well-documented phenomena and character in both historical and literary perspectives, but it lacks scholarship in how it materializes in the modern day. My project analyzes 21st century cinematic re-imaginings of the holy fool and develops two new models of understanding the fool (the unholy fool and the insane fool).

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: LAURA HOWELLS '20



One of our newest alumni, **Laura Howells '20**, is currently in Estonia on a coveted—and, due to COVID, a long-delayed—research Fulbright fellowship. She sends the following tidings to us from the Baltics:

Hello from Tallinn, Estonia!

After a year of countless delays and near-cancellations, I am so grateful to be writing this letter from Estonia, where I will be

conducting research for the next eight months.

My first month here has been a whirlwind of experiences. Estonia is about 17,500 square miles in total, which is roughly half the size of Maine. Needless to say, travel from one city to another is fast and convenient for tourists and locals alike. Travel from Tallinn to the Russian border town of Narva (photo on top right, with Russia across the river), Lahemaa National Park, the old university town of Tartu (bottom right photo), and other locations is just a short train or bus ride away.

The weather here has been unseasonably warm (up to 90°F on some days!) and yet, because of travel restrictions, the capital city of Tallinn has not welcomed its normal swarm of cruise ship tourists. The beautiful Old Town (pictured below) has some of the best preserved Medieval structures and is peppered with nice cafés and tranquil parks.

While in Estonia, I am looking forward to pursuing a research project alongside scholars at the Tallinn University of Technology (TalTech). I plan to investigate the divisions in Estonian society among ethnic Estonians and Russians, the latter of whom comprise about one-third of



the total population of 1.3 million. This will form the basis for deeper research

into the opportunities for fostering “cyber resilience” against foreign information and influence operations.

I owe a big thank you to many members of the Russian Department and broader Bowdoin community for guiding me on the path to this amazing opportunity and encouraging me to pursue research at the intersection of Political Science and Russian Area Studies.



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: JANE BUCHANAN '96

Another alumna of our program, **Jane Buchanan '96**, writes to us from New York, where she currently serves as Deputy Director for Disability Rights at Human Rights Watch. (We're planning to have Jane visit Bowdoin during the upcoming academic year to speak to current students about her experiences advocating for human rights in Russia—stay tuned for details!)

Russian language and the curiosity to learn more and more deeply sparked by the Russian department professors and my fellow Russian students have been essential to every step of my career, have taken me so many interesting places, and have helped me pursue work that I love.

After graduating from Bowdoin, I spent a year and a half in Siberia, in Irkutsk and on Lake Baikal, which were some of the richest experiences of my life so far. I studied Russian, hiked in the Sayan and Khamar-Daban mountain ranges, traveled in Russia and Asia, and met all kinds of interesting people and made dear friends who are still in my life today.

I initially thought I would be pursue environmental work in Russia. Then, during my master's degree, I interned with a Russian human rights and environmental activist, a position I was able to get because of my Russian language skills. This experience led me to become committed to human rights work, and have spent my career working in most former Soviet countries.



I spent two years directing a small Russian human rights organization working with Russian lawyers providing legal aid to victims of the conflicts in Chechnya.

I have been at Human Rights Watch since 2005. I am based in New York, but have conducted research and advocacy on human rights violations across most countries of the former Soviet region: topics like armed conflicts, police violence, refugees, media freedom, labor rights, children's rights women's rights, migrants' rights, and led campaigns to highlight the human rights abuses associated with Russia's hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Since, both the International Olympic Committee and FIFA have established human rights departments and made human rights an aspect of all future event bids.

I have since expanded my work to a different portfolio of supervising a team of researchers advocating for the human rights of people with disabilities and older people globally. I am still deeply involved in work in Russia, Caucasus, and Central Asia on these topics.

I am so grateful to the Russian department of my era, especially my classmates, Hugh, Gary, Rachel, Amy, Eric, and others and to Professor Knox-Voina and Professor Miller. You are all stars and inspirations. Обнимаю вас всех!

Please Keep in Touch! Поддерживайте связь с нами!

We are always happy to hear from our Bowdoin Russian Department alumni and grateful for your support. We would be very interested in having you visit campus to meet with current students to discuss the role of Russian in your career path or set up a long-distance internship or career mentorship for our students. We would also just love to hear from you and find out what you are up to! Please be in touch through the alumni page of our website. And if you have a creative idea that you would like to bring to life, please do let us know!

Find us on the web:

