

and central data on mortality rates, first and foremost empirically to “prove the reality of released invalids’ mortality as a historical phenomenon with statistical evidence.”

Webinars will never replace the adventures and conversations, the socializing and debates of in-person conferences. These are, after all, among the greatest joys of academic life. As a practical matter, the webinar platform used by ASEES, GoToWebinar, much like Zoom, does allow for paper presentations only slightly more cumbersome than non-virtual conference papers. The questions, written in the “chat” function by members of the audience, need to be read and gathered by a commentator or facilitator. Whatever the skill of that person in scanning the written questions and, for example, gathering similar questions together, participants cannot easily build on or respond to one another as in a live discussion.

Many of the factors leading to the success of a webinar conference—framing a topic that commands broad interest, presenting a line-up of compelling speakers, incentivizing paper-givers to present their best work with the expectation of publication, not to mention the other mundane, time-consuming tasks of good organization—are the very same ones that make for a successful conventional conference. Webinars will benefit specifically from advance training sessions and technical support from an organizer; we were fortunate to have Mary Arnstein of ASEES, without whom this series would never have happened. In addition, the co-sponsors of this conference—the Kennan Institute, Georgetown CEERES, and the Russian History Seminar of Washington, DC—all advertised these

webinars on their lists and social media, as did ASEES and the participants themselves.

Webinars do have two major advantages over conventional conferences. First, the potential audiences are considerably larger than the biggest conference panels. Some of these webinars attracted almost 400 registered participants; the number of those who will click on links to the recordings will make their audiences even larger. Second, these webinars required technical and institutional support, as opposed to funding. While this might be attractive at a time when academia faces budget deficits as far as the eye can see, virtual conferences in the end cannot replace face-to-face gatherings. But they are also more than merely a viable replacement for events that cannot take place during a pandemic. For certain events, such as those that need to be done without large amounts of funding and those that can garner significant audiences, they represent a genuinely valuable alternative.

*Michael David-Fox is a Professor of History at Georgetown University. His current book project, “Crucibles of Power: Smolensk Under Nazi and Soviet Rule,” is under contract with Harvard University Press.*

INDEX OF ADVERTISERS	
American Councils/ACTR	12
Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship	8
Kritika/Slavica/ Three Strings Books	26
SRAS	15
U of Kansas Slavic Online Prog	11

In addition to articles and news columns, NewsNet also features a limited number of advertisements from various organizations presenting scholarly publications, products, services, or opportunities of interest to those in the Russian, Eurasian, and Central European fields. Please contact [newsnet@pitt.edu](mailto:newsnet@pitt.edu) for rates, specs and production schedule.

## 2020 ASEES BOARD OF DIRECTORS ELECTIONS

We are pleased to announce the slate of candidates for the 2020 election for positions on the ASEES Board of Directors: Vice President/President-Elect and two Members-at-Large, serve three-year terms from January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2023. We thank them for their willingness to stand as candidates to serve on the ASEES Board.

Candidates for Vice President / President Elect

- **Adeeb Khalid**, Carleton College
- **Joan Neuberger**, University of Texas, Austin

Candidates for Members-at-Large

- **Katherine Bowers**, University of British Columbia (Canada)
- **Theodora Dragostinova**, Ohio State University
- **Paul Goode**, University of Bath (UK)
- **Sunnie Rucker-Chang**, University of Cincinnati

For more information on the election including the candidate bios, visit [our website](#). Information on how to vote will be distributed by email to current members of ASEES by late June.



## The Screens of Academe

ELIOT BORENSTEIN, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

*“Our country has endured serious trials many times: the Pechenegs tormented it, and so did the Polovtsy. Russia has dealt with everything, and we will defeat this coronavirus infection.”—Vladimir Putin*

*“Eliot, together, we’ll work through these tough times.”—Email from Toyota Motor Sales*

*“If a person stays positive, they will be healthy.”—Alexander Lukashenko*

*“You again! You again!”—Masyanya*

*“I’m sure it will come as no surprise that we are postponing your lecture.”—Email from a colleague at X University.*

*“The Wahl Color Pro Cordless Rechargeable Hair Clipper and Trimmer is Temporarily Out of Stock.”—Amazon.com*

*Author’s note: Please note that this essay was written before the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests and police violence, and does not reflect the pain and turmoil that have come to the fore.*

A few weeks ago, I was invited to write this essay for the June issue of *NewsNet*. This was flattering (I'm easily flattered), so I agreed. My travel schedule had just gone from biweekly assaults on the global climate to the occasional, but thrilling, jaunt to the grocery store down the street. Talking asynchronously to a large group of possibly imaginary people separated by vast distances is the highpoint of my day.

The suggested topic was something along the lines of "Doing Slavic Studies During a Global Pandemic," but it's hard to claim any particular expertise. If you're a Slavist, and if you're either working or fretting about not working, you're doing it during a pandemic. We are all in the same boat, even if it is a pestilent cruise liner with many of us in steerage.

I was asked because of some of the public activities I've been involved in since we all moved online, but describing them, while possibly helpful, feels a bit like the egregious calls for increased productivity that have managed to make sheltering in place even more stressful ("Learn

a language! Discover gravity! Write *King Lear!*"). I have been productive, but I'm also middle-aged, tenured, pathologically regimented about my workflow, and embarrassingly bourgeois. My children are mostly grown (or, in the case of my intellectually disabled younger son, as grown as he's going to get). And I'm taking a remarkably effective cocktail of antidepressants, paid for by my insurance. Yes, I'm oversharing, but if there are two things that a global crisis should teach us, it's that we must remove the stigma surrounding mental health, and that walling off our personal life from our work life is a pointless exercise.

In my lifelong compulsion to be what Thomas the Tank Engine refers to as a "very useful engine," I trained my New York colleagues to use Zoom the week before we were all sent home, set up a Facebook group (jointly with Shannon Donnally Spasova) for academics adjusting to remote instruction ("[Online Teaching Tips for the Plague Averse](#)"), established an asynchronous book club on the Discord platform ("[Plague-Averse](#)

[Online Book Club](#)") [1], and conducted a solo weekly online lecture series for the Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia ("[Russian Internet Memes: The Short Course](#)"). [2]

I didn't do this because I'm hugely ambitious, or insufferably vain; my ambition and vanity are both, I hope, sufferable enough. I did it as a coping mechanism. Frenzied activity (combined with the aforementioned meds) is what keeps me from lying immobilized on the couch, contemplating a viral apocalypse cheered on by a presidential death cult. So many of us have spent years entertaining fantasies of the end of the world; certainly, Russian and Slavic cultures provide no shortage of grist for that particular mill. [3]

In any case, I want to stress that some of my preoccupations here are dependent on dumb luck (getting a job as opposed to not getting one) and undeniable privilege (the cushy life of a professor at an R1 university). By no means do they represent the most pressing concerns of the majority of academics, but they do have ramifications for how the field sees itself.

Two weeks before everything ground to a halt, I walked up and down the grocery aisles to stock up on essentials (Text to my wife: "Do we need the apocalypse cheese today, or can it wait until Friday?"). I was overcome with a despair that I can only call uncanny: I've seen this movie so many times, and now it's actually happening. Things were going to get grim. Even if I survived, people I knew were probably going to die. And they did: a retired senior colleague with a COVID diagnosis, and my 37-year-old

niece (we will wait for months for a report from the overworked medical examiner). In a country devastated by lack of planning, at least my grief showed foresight.

Contemplating the pandemic, I can't be the only one who is surprised and not surprised at the same time. Sheltering in place has fostered a notorious sense of timelessness not just because of the disruption of weekly schedules, but because of the shock of a horrific fantasy that has become real. There are too many familiar narratives that all this resembles, and we're afraid to commit to any of them.

I'm writing these words in the second week of May; by the time you read them, we could still be in the thick of it (my pessimistic guess), or we could all be tired of first-wave pandemic postmortems. In the best-case scenario, any ideas I might offer for continuing our teaching and research during the COVID outbreak will be too late. But even so, it's an exercise worth doing. One of the lessons of two months of timelessness should involve thinking about the recent past in order to rebuild our near future.

In Don DeLillo's magnificent 1985 novel *White Noise*, an unprecedented environmental disaster is a godsend to one of the bureaucrats supposedly helping victims: just think how useful this data will be for their next simulation! We don't need to get quite that cynical, but it is highly unlikely that this is the last time public life will be suspended thanks to a pandemic. So what can we do better? How can we avoid being surprised by what we've been expecting all along?

On Facebook (my only home away from home), there have been a number of legitimately appalled reactions to tone-deaf emails from university administrations suggesting or requiring that departments have a back-up plan for when instructors fall ill (or worse). The message seems to be: "sorry you might die, but please make sure someone turns in your grades."

Still, let's imagine an almost unimaginable world, where faculty and the administration are working together to achieve common goals while expressing empathy and avoiding corporate doublespeak. The issues are not so binary. It's not simply a matter of finding someone to soldier on after you lay down your life on some higher educational hill: what if you're just sick? Or grieving? At the beginning of each Zoom class, I always checked in to see how my students were doing. One of them said that another of her professors was sick, and she was worried. But she also didn't know how to express her concern or get information, so she simply worried on her own.

There are legitimate reasons not to grant outsiders access to your class's LMS (Learning Management System). But why not have a departmental buddy system, where each of us adds one trusted colleague to the system so that they can facilitate communication when we can't? If we are the ones arranging it, we can opt for solidarity and collaboration rather than surveillance.

Now that we have had a glimpse of how bad things can get, departments and programs should institute structures that facilitate the move

online when the next wave or next pandemic hits. We need crisis plans, perhaps a crisis point person, and we need to know what we're doing and how we're doing it before we lose the straightforwardness of in-person communication. And, like it or not, we need to insist that our colleagues get trained and remain up-to-date on whatever LMS our institution adopts, as well as the platform that eventually succeeds Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or whatever we're using now. There are plenty of reasons to distrust educational technology, and if I were at an underfunded state school, I'd be very concerned about a push to turn the crisis into the norm. But being a Luddite is no longer simply a matter of personal choice; collective responsibility demands a basic level of proficiency, even if we choose not to use any of these tools under non-crisis conditions.

We also need to recognize that most colleges and universities have a much stronger infrastructure for supporting undergraduate students than for graduates. Undergrads on a residential campus, in addition to being the college's *raison d'être*, are treated as part of a community from the moment of matriculation, while grad students are atomized. Grad students are much more dependent on faculty for advising and guidance, even as they are also more likely to be fully established (rather than emerging) adults. Faculty must be careful not to reproduce the very dynamics we dislike in the communications we receive from the administration.

In the first few weeks of the pandemic, I saw that some Slavic graduate students were organizing

COUNCIL on  
FOREIGN  
RELATIONS

## International Affairs Fellowship for Tenured International Relations Scholars

*Faculty from a variety of academic backgrounds can take advantage of their sabbatical year gaining hands-on experience in the foreign policymaking field.*

Apply online now through October 31, 2020

Visit [cfr.org/fellowships](https://cfr.org/fellowships) or contact [tirs.fellowships@cfr.org](mailto:tirs.fellowships@cfr.org).

themselves online into a dissertation support group, and I asked if there was any way that concerned faculty could be helpful, and if departments could be doing something different. The responses were very polite and appreciative, but the main takeaway was: could you faculty please stop overwhelming us with pointless emails expressing support but lacking in content? I was immediately reminded of all the vapid messages I've received from nearly every corporate entity I've ever interacted with (the most mystifying: rubberstamps.com). The lines of communication need to be kept open, but we have to make sure we aren't simply fulfilling our own need to feel helpful rather than providing actual help.

Most of the public attention and concern about higher education under pandemic conditions has rightly centered around questions of teaching. After all, whatever our individual priorities might be, teaching is the reason that most of us have jobs (if we have jobs at all). Very few faculty are being paid only to Think Great Thoughts.

Moreover, the switch to remote instruction has been so time-consuming and nerve-wracking that few of us have the leisure to think about our research beyond the constant anxiety over not getting any of it done. For tenure-track faculty, this is a life-or-death question, and those institutions that have automatically delayed the tenure clock are displaying a level of basic humanity that should not come as a surprise (but often does).

I can only speak for the humanists, since I am fortunate in being able

to steer clear of empirical data, wet labs, and (shudder) human subjects. Theoretically, we have it easier than many of our colleagues, since a lot of us can do our research without leaving the house (or are lucky enough to have gathered sufficient archival materials to last awhile). It's a great profession for introverts and misanthropes. And yet...

And yet it turns out that, for all our erudition, we are still hominids who value face-to-face, in-person interaction, and who sense that something is missing without it. When it comes to connecting with people beyond our home institutions, this type of contact has already come under threat. Budgets were shrinking long before our world started to resemble the first 100 pages of Stephen King's *The Stand*. More and more job interviews have moved from conferences to Skype, in recognition of the scant resources available to job seekers and the unwillingness of university administration to cough up money for travel and hotels. There was one bright side, though: if, in the early days of remote interviewing, Skype sessions were often awkward disasters, once the practice got more standard, more and more people learned to adapt to the strictures of teleconferencing.

Is this the future of conferences and symposia? In the short term, perhaps, and it's unfortunate. Pathetic as it sounds, conventions are the social highlight of my year, and most of the intellectual and professional benefit accrued is from interactions in the hallways and restaurants, rather than at panels. This would clearly be a great loss.

But just as we have learned to conduct

job interviews on Skype, we might benefit from figuring out how best to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Zoom and its competitors. This is one of the reasons I did the Russian Internet Memes lecture series. NYU's Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia has, from the beginning, tried to combine the benefits of in-person events with an on-line presence that was meant to be more than an afterthought. The Jordan Center lives in both worlds; with one of them "on pause," why not see what we could do in the other?

It turns out that we can do a lot, but it continues to be awkward. By humanist standards I'm a techie, but I've spent an embarrassing amount of lecture time searching for the right window to open when I share a screen, or talking over a YouTube video only to discover that no one can hear me. Even worse, I've finally resorted to that terrible cliché of asking my college-age son for help.

On the other hand, the lectures have had a much bigger audience than they would have if they'd been delivered in person (over 100 people for the first one, between 50 and 70 for the next five). I see this as a measure of success not so much because of sheer numbers, but because it means that we are all seeing each other's faces and reminding ourselves that there's a larger world out there that shares our scholarly interests. I hope that the lectures have had sufficient intellectual content (after all, they're part of my preparation for a book on the same subject), but their purpose is as much therapeutic as academic. When I run out of topics, I'm tempted to see if people just want to meet every Friday,

drink coffee "together," and simply chat. It sounds ridiculous, but after a few more months of coronavirus, it might even be appealing.

The lectures are also archived online, which I think is great. But they're also their own genre. I would never have considered presenting any of them in their present form if I were invited to give an on-campus talk; they're provisional, slight, and veer a bit too much in the direction of entertainment. If they haven't matured by the time they make their way into my upcoming Russian memes book, then the book does not deserve to be published.

But what about replacing on-campus talks with Zoom lectures? Then we're back to the same problem we have with Zoom conferences, compounded by the fact that the relative intimacy of an on-campus visit provides opportunities for real intellectual exchanges with faculty and students that would not happen otherwise. And if we preserve them on the Internet, we run into another problem.

By the time this essay comes out, I will probably have given a Zoom talk at Northwestern University to replace a visit scheduled back in the days when social distancing just looked like being antisocial. No one has asked to put it online (yet), and if they did, I'd probably say yes. But it's a book talk, related to my 2019 monograph *Plots against Russia*. For me, that represents research that is long behind me. But what if this were one of my current projects? Then I would have some qualms. I worry that Zoom and YouTube could do to visiting lectures what Craigslist did to personal ads: who needs multiple, local venues

when you have a single, global outlet just one mouse click away?

None of these questions can be easily addressed, but address them we must. 2020 has shown that circumstances have a tendency to overtake us. I say this not as the gadget-obsessed screen junkie that I am, but as someone sympathetic to fears that technology can be adopted too quickly and too enthusiastically for our own good. If we avoid these questions, they will be answered for us by others. And I can all but guarantee

that whatever those answers are, we will not like them.

### Notes

[1] We're reading *The Magic Mountain*, and you can join at any time.

[2] It's possible that the series will still be a going concern by the time you get this newsletter; in any case, the lectures are archived on the Jordan Center's YouTube channel.

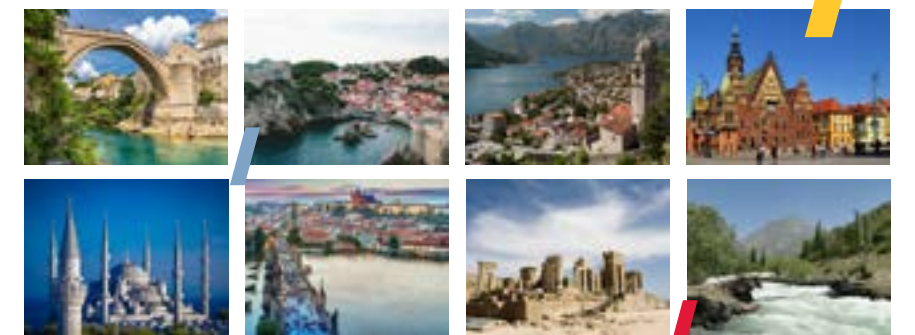
[3] If you haven't read Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's 1990 short story "Hygiene" yet, or Yana Wagner's *To the Lake (Vongozero)*, then you probably shouldn't.

*Eliot Borenstein is a professor of Russian & Slavic Studies at New York University.*

## KU SLAVIC ONLINE: Slavic & Eurasian Languages Fall 2020

<b>BCRS 104/105</b> Elementary Bosnian   Croatian   Montenegrin   Serbian <i>Prof. Marta Pirnat-Greenberg</i>	<b>PLSH 104</b> Introductory Polish <i>Prof. Vassileva-Karagoyzova</i>	<b>TURK 104</b> Introductory Turkish <i>Prof. Predolac</i>
---	--	--

<b>CZCH 204</b> Intermediate Czech <i>Prof. Saskova-Pierce</i>	<b>PERS 110</b> Introductory Persian   Tajik   Dari   Farsi <i>Prof. Ahmad</i>
--	--



Strategic and Critical for business and security careers, offered online for students looking to stand out in job placements, graduate students in need of research languages, heritage speakers, and others.

**KU Department of Slavic Languages & Literatures**

1000 University Ave., 1000-1000, 1000-1000  
 202-328-7000 | 202-328-7000 | 202-328-7000  
 @ku\_languages | @ku\_languages | @ku\_languages