

A Report on “Queering the Russian Nineteenth Century: An International Symposium”

Amherst, Massachusetts, United States, 15 March 2025

On a rainy Saturday, March 15th, a group of scholars from across the U.S. and the U.K., along with faculty and students from around Western Massachusetts, gathered to share their research at the first-ever “Queering the Russian Nineteenth Century” symposium. Hosted and sponsored by the Amherst College Center for Russian Culture, the symposium took place over the course of the day in the Stanley J. Rabinowitz Reading Room, where visitors were surrounded by the Thomas P. Whitney’s collection of rare Russian books, manuscripts, and journals; a prominent display of twelve samovars; and a magnificent view of the Pioneer Valley.

Roman Utkin set the tone for the day by reminding scholars of the origins of queer Slavic Studies through his analysis of Simon Karlinsky’s 1976 *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol*. Speaking on the subject “When Russian Literature Became Queer,” Utkin reminded attendees of the question at the heart of this symposium: What can Queer Studies bring to Slavic Studies? Mari Jarris proposed an answer to this central question through a camp reading of Nikolay Chernychevsky’s *Chto delat’?*. Jarris argued against the masculinized reading of the text popularized by Lenin, and towards a feminist or queer reading, which recognizes the excess, repetition, and outrageous aspects of the text. Such an approach revealed how the representation of collective labor and gender relations in the novel allowed women to emerge as revolutionary subjects.

Maya Garcia’s analysis of cross-gender casting in Tchaikovsky’s opera *Oprichnik*, particularly in the mezzo vocal range, reminded attendees of the visibility of queerness on stage. Similarly, Ruth Averbach’s paper on “Heterosexual Eroticism and the Work of Aleksandr Aleksandrov” brought trans visibility to the forefront. Averbach’s paper highlighted the uniqueness of Aleksandrov’s position in having his gender officially recognized by the Tsar, and moved on to read Aleksandrov outside of his queerness. She examined how Alexandrov’s transness did not necessarily equate to queerness, complicating the relationship between transness and queerness in the nineteenth century.

In his presentation, Myles Garbarini explored the intersection of friendship and sexuality in Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin* and offered a queer reading of Dostoevsky’s *Netochka Nezvanova*. Garbarini’s analysis highlighted how both texts blur the boundaries between platonic and romantic affection and can be read and interpreted from a queer perspective. In a similar vein, Brett Donohoe, the moderator and organizer of the symposium, presented a paper on depictions of homosexuality in Pushkin’s and Dmitrii Oznobishin’s emulations of classical Persian poetry, focusing on how themes of pederasty and queerness were adapted and reimagined within the context of Russian

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Golden Age literature. He explored how Pushkin's engagement with orientalized motifs complicated contemporary understandings of sexuality and cultural identity.

Two presenters explored the legal regulation of gay relationships in Imperial Russia. Maria Mayofis reported on her findings concerning a specific investigation by the Third Section, initiated in late 1837 to early 1838, which uncovered regulations of homosexual relations by members of the political police. According to her archival research, these relationships were not prosecuted as standalone offenses, but only in connection with other crimes. Having traveled from the UK to Amherst College specifically for the symposium, Olga Petri, a geographer, presented her research on how queer male inhabitants of fin-de-siècle Imperial Saint Petersburg experienced urban environments and spaces. Drawing closely on archival materials, Petri emphasized the role of the *nomernaia bania*—public bathhouses that offered private bathing spaces by the hour—which created spatial opportunities for queer encounters in the city.

As members of the Russian Studies community, attendees shared that the symposium felt like a breath of fresh air, bringing together new perspectives in the field. The symposium provided an opportunity to engage with and exchange innovative readings of canonical texts. Encouragingly, symposia focused on queer Slavic Studies are becoming more and more common, with recent gatherings at Princeton, Columbia, and Oxford reflecting the growing interest and visibility of this field. We sincerely hope that this event marks the beginning of a new tradition at Amherst College—one that not only continues to center queer scholarship but also expands to include research on the women's rights movements that emerged in the nineteenth century, as well as highlighting voices of scholars currently in exile due to political censorship in Russian academia. The symposium was a credit to its organizers and was made possible by the joint efforts of Brett Donohoe and Catherine Ciepiela, the Director of the Amherst College Center for Russian Culture. We thank them for convening the symposium and facilitating the participation of all the speakers.

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