

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INITIATIVE IN

RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY,
LITERATURE,
and
RELIGIOUS THOUGHT



Northwestern
University

“Russian literature awakened readers from moral torpor and shocked them into reexamining their lives.”

— Gary Saul Morson,
Wonder Confronts Certainty

FOUNDED in 2022, the Northwestern University Research Initiative in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought (NU RPLRT Research Initiative) grew out of a desire to support and expand the kind of learning that happens in Prof. Morson’s classes. Encountering the Russian classics, students experience the power of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy to help them “see the world differently,” as one of them wrote, proving Morson’s point that “one does not have to be Russian to appreciate that the issues debated pertain to all of us and will never lose their vitality.” Research Initiative scholars, too, have experienced the transformative power of the humanistic traditions (secular and religious) speaking through Russian writers and brought to life in Morson’s teaching and books. We have witnessed, in ourselves and in our students, how these traditions transcend their original time and place to help form us into the type of persons we want to be. “It really made me think through my value system, who I am, why I’m alive, and what I really believe in as a human being,” one student wrote after reading *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Anna Karenina* with Prof. Morson.

Their unique power to inspire explains why Russian philosophy, literature, and religious thought are often studied together, even why they *should* be studied together. In recent decades the study of them has become an intellectual enterprise of global reach and stature, attracting a wide range of scholars across disciplines and throughout the world. The NU RPLRT Research Initiative was established to provide an institutional home for this

international community of scholars and to provide opportunities for students to participate in the vibrant research projects and conversations we are fostering. Faculty research and teaching are often seen as divorced or even at odds, but we aim to integrate them and to include students in all aspects of our work. In fact, one of our student members, Austin Benedetto, a Northwestern undergraduate majoring in Economics, is among our most prolific authors, having published four essays in our online research forum.

RESEARCH VISION

THE NU RPLRT Research Initiative fosters scholarship about the global relevance of Russian thought and literature, promoting free and open inquiry and diverse perspectives. Diversity of opinion is one of our core values: We seek to forge and occupy a unique space, one that is secular and non-confessional but welcoming of colleagues with deeply-held religious convictions or commitments. Russian philosophy and religious thought, no less than the great works of Russian literature, are part of the world's cultural heritage. Our research program highlights their global significance, especially for human rights, civil society and democracy, and the rule of law. We explore the roots of authoritarianism and violence together with the intellectual and spiritual resources within Russian culture for affirming universal human values and for promoting peace and justice. There is no more powerful repudiation of Russian authoritarianism and autocracy, past and present, than Russia's own humanistic traditions—what Gary Saul Morson has referred to as the “Russian counter-tradition.”

ACHIEVEMENTS

SINCE its founding in 2022, the NU RPLRT Research Initiative has flourished. It has attracted 150 scholars from around the world, ranging from doctoral

students to the most eminent figures in our fields. Our membership includes Ukrainian scholars (the best response to “cancel Russia” sentiments) and Russian scholars in exile. Twenty-four members serve on our distinguished advisory board; the rest are affiliated as research scholars or as graduate fellows. Our comprehensive website showcases them and their work, presents our research vision, and details our activities: <https://rprrt.northwestern.edu/>

Over the past two years the NU RPLRT Research Initiative has sponsored a series of conferences, established an online research forum, and laid the groundwork for an online annual journal.

In April 2023 our inaugural conference, *What’s New about the New Atheism? The Enduring Relevance of Russian Philosophy*, took place in Evanston and was highly successful, with one senior scholar describing it as the best conference he had ever attended. In November 2022 and March 2023 we co-sponsored two international conferences. The first, *Russian Literature and Philosophy: Religion, Nationalism, and Dissidence*, was held at the Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora in Brazil. The second, *Russian Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Thought in a Time of Catastrophe*, was hosted by the Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP) in Lisbon. Both conferences were part of our efforts to integrate our fields of study across the Global North and South.

In June 2024, we will co-sponsor a conference with the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Poland: *Nicolas Berdyaev and Russian Philosophy in the West*. In November 2024 we will co-sponsor a conference with the Hamilton Center at the University of Florida: *Religion, Human Dignity, and Human Rights: New Paradigms for Russia and the West*.

Launched in 2023, *Northwestern University Forum in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought* is an attractive and dynamic online venue that now features more than twenty-five essays and other posts. In late

2024 we hope to publish the first volume of our online annual journal, *Northwestern University Studies in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought*. Peter Gregory Winsky (University of Southern California) and Octavian Gabor (Methodist College) serve as moderators/curators of our research forum and as journal editors, alongside Susan McReynolds, editor-in-chief, and Randall Poole.

SUPPORTING THE INITIATIVE

In less than two years, the NU RPLRT Research Initiative has become one of the most successful research groups of its kind at Northwestern University. Your support will help us to become the preeminent international center for the study of Russian thought and literature—continuing Gary Saul Morson’s intellectual legacy for Northwestern and the world.

Your support will enable us to do the following:

- ▶ involve more students in our conferences, symposia and workshops, and research;
- ▶ advise and mentor more doctoral students;
- ▶ continue our conference series, at Northwestern and with our global partner institutions;
- ▶ continue our research forum, publish our annual journal, and launch a research/book series (all with significant production, editorial, and translation work);
- ▶ bring research scholars to Northwestern on visiting appointments;
- ▶ provide research grants and other forms of support for scholars (especially those displaced by authoritarianism, war, and other forms of violence);
- ▶ pursue academic and public outreach by relating scholarship on Russian philosophy, literature, and religious thought to issues of broader public interest, such as the fate of universal human values in a globalizing world, “post-secularism,” secular and religious forms of humanism and their

roles in countering authoritarianism and violence, and how scholars and educators can share the rich resources of these vibrant philosophical and spiritual traditions with new generations of students;

- ▶ nurture a community in which students, early-career scholars, and senior experts from all over the world can learn from each other, build expertise in their fields, and draw on the rich traditions of Russian humanism to promote global understanding and respect for human dignity and human rights;

- ▶ ensure that the NU RPLRT Research Initiative serves as a model for upholding the principles of intellectual freedom, diversity of viewpoints, and freedom of expression.

Gifts are welcome at all levels and can be used to support the NU RPLRT Research Initiative immediately.

For more information about supporting the research initiative, please contact Ashley Sinnott (ashley.sinnott@northwestern.edu). For our website, please visit <https://rprrt.northwestern.edu/>

DIRECTORS

SUSAN McREYNOLDS is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Northwestern University. Her research interests include Russian and German literature and philosophy; nationalism, antisemitism, and religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. She is the author of *Redemption and the Merchant God: Dostoevsky's Economy of Salvation and Antisemitism* (Northwestern UP 2008), and editor, with a revised translation, of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, published as a new Norton Critical Edition in 2011. She is currently completing a monograph on Dostoevsky's contributions to twentieth-century cultural and political

developments and several projects on Tolstoy, including a study of Tolstoy and Hannah Arendt.

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RANDALL A. POOLE is Professor of Intellectual History at the College of St. Scholastica and a senior fellow of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University School of Law. He is the translator and editor of *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy* (2003) and co-editor of five other volumes: *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity* (2010, 2013), *Religious Freedom in Modern Russia* (2018), *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* (2020), *Evgenii Trubetskoi: Icon and Philosophy* (2021), and *Law and the Christian Tradition in Modern Russia* (2022). He is also the author of many articles and book chapters on Russian intellectual history, philosophy, and religion.

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BRADLEY UNDERWOOD, an ordained Baptist minister, is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Northwestern University. Prior to studying at Northwestern, he received a Master's Degree in Theological Studies from Duke Divinity School at Duke University and a Bachelor of Arts in History from Baylor University. He studies nineteenth-century Russian literature, especially the relation among literature, philosophy, and theology. In May 2023, he defended his Master's thesis, *A Theatrical Encounter: Gogol's Long Conversion and The Inspector General* (316 pp.), written under the direction of Professors Susan McReynolds and Ilya Kutik. He intends to write his dissertation on the spiritual thread from Gogol to Tolstoy to complement the well-established line from Gogol to Dostoevsky.

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SELECTED ARTICLES

**Northwestern University Forum in Russian Philosophy,
Literature, and Religious Thought**

<https://sites.northwestern.edu/nurprt/>

Paul Contino, “Sergei Bulgakov: The Dissidence of Humility”
(February 2023)

Caryl Emerson, “Love as an Act of Rebellion: Orthodoxy and
Literary Culture” (March 2023)

Susan McReynolds, “Studying Russian Culture in a Time of
Catastrophe: Taking A Stand” (March 2023)

Randall A. Poole, “Russian Orthodoxy, Human Rights, and
the War on Ukraine” (March 2023)

Peter Gregory Winsky, “*Notes from the Underground*,
COVID-19, Freedom, and Compassion” (March 2023)

Erik Eklund, “‘The Name of God has Priority’: ‘God’ and the
Aphatic Element in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*”
(April 2023)

Jillian Pignataro, “Sergei’s Bulgakov’s Divine Humanity and
Chernyshevsky’s Human Divinity in *What is to be Done?*”
(May 2023)

Peter Gregory Winsky, “Interview with Mikhail Epstein
on *The Russian Anti-World: Politics on the Verge of
Apocalypse*” (May 2023)

Amy Singleton Adams, “War and Peace: Orthodox Icons and
Putin’s Politics of the Sacred” (December 2023)

Austin Benedetto, “Pursuing Truth through Doubt and
Inquiry” (March 2024)

