
CRITICAL DISCUSSION FORUM: CRISIS, CONTINGENCY, AND THE FUTURE OF REEES—PERSPECTIVES ON THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE FIELD

Introduction

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The last two years have been a rough time for our discipline. As usual for pandemics, it hit the most vulnerable particularly hard. For those on the job market in Slavic literatures in 2020–21, there was not a single tenure-line job advertised in the AATSEEL job list, as of April 2021.¹ The equivalent number of such positions in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies (REEES) in history and other disciplines is not much higher. Current PhD students are graduating into this non-existent market, but nobody has abolished their basic needs: food, housing, health insurance. Even in the best-case scenario, when institutions resume hiring, current jobseekers will face a heavily clogged market for years. Even more cruel are the cuts and layoffs that have already hit and will continue to threaten our field. In May 2021, Ohio University terminated its Russian program and the full-time faculty who for many years sustained it.² The University of Vermont has similarly announced the closure of its Russian major.³ Layoffs have taken place elsewhere, though much less visibly. Thanks to Steven Segal and Rebecca Mitchell's work, Slavists may have heard about Canisius College's revocation of its Russian historian's tenure as part of its cost-cutting measures, but the much more common realities of non-renewable lectureships and adjunct faculty positions have rendered many of our colleagues who have lost their jobs during the pandemic invisible in their precarity.⁴

Indeed, the leaders of these and other colleges (Ithaca College, Marquette University) seem to have seized upon the moment as an opportunity to enact the academic version of the shock doctrine, eliminating programs they never

1. AATSEEL, "AATSEEL Job Listing, www.aatseel.org/joblist (accessed April 1, 2021).

2. Members of the REEES Community, "Open Letter on the Termination of Russian Studies Faculty at Ohio University," *Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia*, June 1, 2020, jordanrussiacenter.org/news/open-letter-on-the-termination-of-russian-studies-faculty-at-ohio-university (accessed November 3, 2021).

3. Michael Nietzel, "Major Academic Cutbacks Proposed at University of Vermont," *Forbes* (December 3, 2020): www.forbes.com/sites/michaelt Nietzel/2020/12/03/major-academic-cutbacks-proposed-at-university-of-vermont (accessed November 3, 2021).

4. Rebecca Mitchell and Steven Segal, "The 2020 Professor Purges in Retrospect: ASEEES Concerns & Advocacy Plans," *NewsNet* 61, no. 1 (January 2021): 7–8.

liked and otherwise restructuring the operations of their institution in ways impossible before the pandemic.⁵ Cash-strapped institutions such as the City University of New York (CUNY), operating with no financial cushion, responded to dramatic cuts in state funding by laying off over 3,000 adjunct faculty.⁶

The pandemic did not create these problems: it only magnified them. They seem particularly hard to fight in REEES as they clearly originate elsewhere, in federal or state funding cuts and the university's corporatization.⁷

The larger forces involved breed a sense of helplessness. How can a Slavist fight the invisible hand of the market, federal or state-wide budgets cuts, and demographic declines? At best, our field is a tiny corner in our universities with no institutional power to speak of. At worst, it is an endangered zone. We are not even speaking about the majority of US institutions of higher education, where it does not even exist. Fatalism may seem like a psychologically healthier reaction.

The Working Group for Solidarity in REEES was formed in the summer of 2020 in the belief that through our REEES institutions, our positions at our universities, and our solidarity as Slavists, we have agency that can be strategically deployed against not only the emergency of the pandemic but also the deeper problems our field is facing. The Working Group is constituted through regular Zoom meetings: everybody is very welcome to join them. Over this past year, it has launched mutual aid initiatives such as a housing network, an online library, and an academic job market mentorship program. Outreach to the broader discipline constitutes much of our work: we have surveyed REEES area studies centers and drawn up a list of anti-contingency practices, which we have sought to popularize. This cluster, "Crisis, Contingency, and the Future of REEES: Perspectives on the Present and Future of the Field," is another one of our outreach efforts.

What concrete steps do the authors of the two articles comprising this cluster, Ania Aizman, Caitlin Giustiniano and Zachary Hicks, propose? In the first place, they suggest Slavists can act through our institutions: area studies centers at research universities and disciplinary associations. While it has been encouraging to see REEES centers announce a larger number of postdoctoral fellowships this year than in previous years, more could be done to redistribute the discipline's resources towards expanding the professional safety net to those in need. Similarly, ASEES has been growing its roster of support

5. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York, 2007).

6. Sidney Pereira, "CUNY Adjunct Layoffs Are Already Happening Ahead of Cuomo's Expected Budget Cuts," *The Gothamist*, May 14, 2020, gothamist.com/news/cuny-adjunct-layoffs-are-already-happening-ahead-cuomos-expected-budget-cuts (accessed November 3, 2021).

7. To cite some of the more recent scholarship on the neoliberalization of the university, see Adriana Kezar, Daniel T. Scott, and Tom DePaola, *The Gig Academy: Mapping Labor in the Neoliberal University* (Baltimore, 2019); and Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We can Fix Them* (Baltimore, 2018). See also Simon Torricinta's account of the COVID-19 pandemic in this context: "Extinction Event: Given What Is to Come, Schools of Every Kind Are Now at Risk," *n+1*, May 28, 2020, www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/extinction-event/ (accessed November 3, 2021).

programs for graduate students, but it can and should follow the example of some other neighboring disciplinary associations to monitor employment throughout the field and issue best practices to (and where necessary, censure) institutions more generously. It is organizations such as ASEES and AATSEEL that are best positioned to issue best practice guides and ethics codes for members of the field or conduct the kind of surveys on employment and hiring in Slavic of the kind that Ania Aizman calls for in her article. Such data-gathering would make it possible to make claims against the universities degrading employment in our field by replacing what were once tenure-line positions with short-term, poorly paid ones that come with back-breaking teaching loads.

In the second place, we can act through our capacity as faculty at our institutions. Those lucky enough to be on the tenure line—and thus with access not only to a middle-class income and job security but also to free speech and some institutional voice—have an extra responsibility for making sure these benefits are extended to the rest of their colleagues and for preserving the field for those who have yet to enter it professionally. Similarly, while we find the argument of PhD “overproduction” erroneous in that it assumes that there are already too many university teachers out there, faculty accepting graduate students in their programs should also accept much greater responsibility for ensuring good working conditions during the PhD and realistic academic career prospects in the future. According to the survey of PhD students conducted by Caitlin Giustiniano and Zachary Hicks, this is a responsibility that faculty do not always live up to.

Ultimately, in the analysis of our authors, the main problem REEES scholars face is that of casualization, and it is in this sense no different from that faced by our colleagues in other disciplines, and for that matter, by most working people in this and other countries in our neoliberal era. That so many people share this condition can be a cause for optimism: it can serve as a basis for solidarity. At the same time, casualization is a formidable force that has been shaping US universities over the last five decades, when faculty off the tenure-track have risen from a quarter to more than three quarters of the US academic teaching force. Slavic languages and literatures as well as area studies teachers have also suffered their share of labor degradation and it is not difficult to imagine a post-pandemic future in which lecturers and visiting assistant professors replace retiring REEES professors. Unfortunately, moral persuasion and rational arguments that casualization degrades university teachers’ livelihoods and students’ education have failed to move university administrations to rethink their logic of labor cost savings and flexibilization. We have, however, other mechanisms at our disposal to reverse them.

The most obvious one, as both articles suggest, is unionization: not as a union of Slavists, of course, but as participants in or initiators of unionization drives at our institutions. Universities are neither the first nor the last employers to seek to pay their workers less for longer hours and divide their workers into better-paid ones on secure contracts (tenure-line faculty) and more disposable ones (somewhat misleadingly called adjunct faculty, despite the fact that they conduct most of the university’s teaching in some cases). To a good union, opposing such tendencies comes naturally. As a result of

prolonged struggle by the Massachusetts Society of Professors (the union representing librarians and faculty on and off the tenure line at the University of Massachusetts) or Rutgers University's AAUP-AFT, the university administration is required by union contract to pay full-time non-tenure line instructors salaries no less than those of beginning Assistant Professors, thus removing the main incentive for hiring university teachers in casualized positions.

Another mechanism would be to use the leverage of the states or the federal government to force universities to hire university teachers into good jobs. Thus, one leading contender of the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primaries proposed an increase in federal funding for universities in exchange for those universities ensuring that at least 75 percent of their courses are taught by tenure-line faculty. The other condition he placed on this expanded federal funding was reducing public college tuition to zero.⁸ Such a scenario, however, will not happen automatically following the arrival of a president or governors somehow sympathetic to academics' concerns, but will require major organizing efforts be brought to the educational policy agenda.

These suggestions made by the authors of the two articles do not exhaust the possibilities of action that our colleagues in REEES can and should undertake in defense of our field, against departmental closures, against any further erosion of employment in our field, and against discriminatory practices. They represent, however, a starting point for a conversation that is long overdue in Slavic studies.

8. Kevin Carey, "The Bleak Job Landscape of Adjunctopia for PhDs," *New York Times*, May 5, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/upshot/academic-job-crisis-phd.html (accessed November 3, 2021).