

# SLAVIC STUDIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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## **Introduction: The Decline of Slavic?**

In his lucid and wide-ranging 2013 review of Slavic studies in the UK, J. A. Dunn reflects that “there can be no subject area in the UK higher education system that has been subject to more reviews since the end of the Second World War than Slavonic and East European Studies” (Dunn 13). He offers three reasons for this abundance of surveys: first, the strategic significance of the field (especially during the Cold War); second, an unfortunate short-termism on the part of the Higher Education authorities who commissioned these reports but failed to act consistently on their recommendations; and third, Slavic studies’ chronic failure to thrive without substantial state investment. Perhaps the most significant of the five state-commissioned reports listed by Dunn was the 1961 Hayter report, with its recommendation for the establishment of five centers of excellence:

[I]n 1961, Sir William Hayter (former British ambassador to the USSR, 1953–57) produced a government report on Area Studies in the Oriental, African, Eastern European and Slavonic regions, which recommended the establishment or consolidation of five centres of excellence in Soviet and East European area studies at the universities of Birmingham, Glasgow, Oxford, Swansea and London (at SSEES). These centres were to be truly interdisciplinary. Rather than merely combining scholars from different fields, individual scholars were expected to participate in a spectrum of disciplines. Anglo-Soviet cultural agreements took aspiring scholars for year-long study trips beyond the iron curtain, facilitating “deep immersion” in the culture, politics, economics and languages of the countries in the region (Pallot, March 2018 1).

Today, however, one of those five centers of excellence has closed (Swansea no longer offers Russian), while the others are negotiating issues such as falling student recruitment, depleted academic posts, and a relative lack of state investment in Modern Languages departments over the last four decades. While recent threats by individual university management to shrink or close entire ML departments at universities such as Manchester, Hull, Keele, and Nottingham have affected teaching staff across the Humanities at those institutions, the gradual and ongoing attrition of Slavic studies teaching in British universities has made this subject very much the canary in the Modern Languages coal mine. Russian and other Slavic languages (where they are offered)

are often the first programs to be affected by funding cuts. Of UK universities that formerly offered degrees in Russian language and culture, the following have closed their Russian departments: Queen's University Belfast, in Northern Ireland; the Universities of Aberystwyth, Cardiff, Bangor, and Swansea (all in Wales); the University of Bath in England; and the University of Aberdeen in Scotland (Glasgow, after wavering for some years, has decided to retain Russian language at degree level). Of these, only Bath is planning to restore at least one lectureship in Russian language and culture (potentially from 2020).

The withdrawal of Russian language teaching normally leads to the loss of offerings in Slavic literary and cultural studies also, although Film, History, Political Science and Area Studies departments may continue to offer courses relevant to Slavic studies or to retain staff with relevant research specializations. As Judith Pallot, former President of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies recently wrote: "At home, in the UK, scholarship in our area continues to be menaced by the absence of strategically planned support for university posts and researchers. A Russian post abolished here, or the failure to replace an Eastern Europe specialist there, are both markers of a dangerous lack of interest, at any level, in providing sufficient area specialists despite international crises demonstrating the need for them" (Pallot, November 1, 2018). Britain's systemic neglect of Slavic studies begins even before university, where the UK government has failed to support the teaching of Modern Languages in British schools. As a minority language, Russian suffers proportionally more from this lack of institutional support than more popular languages such as French or Spanish.

To use Devon, a large county in the Southwest of England, as an example: Russian was offered as a subject at secondary level in at least five Devon schools from the mid-twentieth century until quite recently. Collectively, these five schools acted as feeder schools to the University of Exeter's Russian Department, which opened in 1966 and survives today as a distinct program within the University's Department of Modern Languages. Today, none of these schools offer Russian: like other modern languages, it has been affected by the withdrawal of exam accreditation and by government cuts to school funding. In 2004, modern languages ceased to be a compulsory GCSE subject. (GCSEs, or General Certificates in Secondary Education, are tests taken by pupils aged about 16; after passing these, they choose a smaller number of subjects to study for the school-leaving qualifications, known as A Levels in most of the UK and Highers in Scotland, where the accreditation system is somewhat different). The proportion of students taking a language GCSE has fallen nationally from 68% in 2004 to 48% in 2017. Many students perceive modern languages as more difficult to pass than other subjects. High running costs for accreditation, combined with fewer pupils choosing modern languages, caused one of the UK's three biggest exam boards to stop award-

ing GCSEs and A Levels in French, German and Spanish in 2016. In 2015, the Scottish Qualifications Authority ceased to accept Russian as an eligible subject for Scotland's Higher exams. However, bucking this trend, student numbers are growing slowly where Russian does survive on school curricula. In 2015, 2,251 students across the UK took Russian at GCSE level (an increase of 2% from 2014) (Tinsley and Board); this growth may reflect rising numbers of heritage speakers in the UK.

Today, Russian is offered by 7% of state schools and 24% of independent (fee-paying) schools in the UK; most students taking A Level Russian are in the independent sector (72%) (Tinsley and Board). The challenge faced by Russian departments across the UK is therefore twofold: to maintain teaching posts when overall declining student numbers have rendered Modern Languages increasingly uneconomical in universities' business models; and to remain visible and accessible to school leavers, especially to the vast majority outside the private sector who are unlikely to have any prior access to Russian language teaching. Russian teaching staff are increasingly encouraged by university managers to tackle the recruitment problem by visiting schools, organizing public engagement events, and participating in university open days, even though the extra commitments inevitably impact on research time and staff wellbeing. Small wonder that Dunn prefaced his review with a wry quote from Ilf and Petrov's *The Twelve Chairs*: "Helping the drowning is the responsibility of those who are drowning" (Dunn 2).

On the other hand, one of the great strengths of UK Russian departments is their outward focus (resisting the increasing internalization of post-Brexit British political trends). The University of Manchester's system of offering jointly accredited degrees with the so-called "Shaninka" (the Moscow Higher School of Social and Economic Sciences), an agreement valid between 1995 and 2022, is an excellent example of external co-operation in the field of Slavic Studies. The majority of Slavic Studies research staff travel regularly to present their research at overseas conferences, including the annual ASEES convention. The British Association for Slavic and East European Studies (BASEES), is an independent scholarly organization (similar to ASEES in the United States) that works to support Slavic Studies in the UK, raising the profile of the discipline both nationally and internationally. It aims to coordinate and effectively represent the work of the British Slavic studies research centers, and to work closely with Slavic researchers and organizations abroad. It funds both postgraduate research and the work of up to a dozen BASEES-affiliated research groups, which organize subject conferences (often with international guests) and occasionally produce edited volumes. Among the most active research groups are the Study Group for Russian and East European Music, the Study Group for the Russian Revolution, and the Study Group for Religion and Spirituality in Russia and Eastern Europe, all of which hold well-attended annual conferences. Two of the most

recently founded study groups focus on Polish studies and post-communist economies, respectively.

In addition to its annual national conference, which is always well-attended by international researchers, BASEES has recently initiated biannual Regional Conferences abroad in cooperation with Slavic studies centers at other universities: Budapest (2016), Uppsala (2018), and Leipzig (September 2020–projected). This initiative is one of several efforts spearheaded by BASEES to facilitate international networking and new collaborations. What’s more, the quinquennial ICCEES World Congress will hold its eleventh meeting in London in 2025 (following a successful invitation to the organizers by BASEES), thus bringing Slavists from all over the globe to the UK. In a further promising development, the UK government’s Arts and Humanities Research Council signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR) in Moscow on March 13, 2019. This collaboration will provide for a series of future seminars and round tables to promote knowledge exchange between arts and humanities researchers in Russia and the UK.

One underlying strength of Russian Studies in the UK is the continuing interest in Russian history among secondary school students. Many students who take a History A Level go on to study Russian history at University; this may or may not lead individual students to take Russian language as part of their degree, but it has assured the continuous presence of Russian and Slavic researchers in the History departments of a majority of UK universities even where little or no Slavic language or culture tuition is offered at degree level. These institutions include Liverpool John Moores University, York St John University, Queen’s University Belfast, the University of the West of England at Bristol, and the Universities of Cardiff, Dundee, Gloucester, Newcastle, Northumbria, and Warwick. Many of these scholars pursue ground-breaking research projects with international outputs: for example, in 2017, Cornell University Press published *Deaf in the USSR: Marginality, Community, and Soviet Identity, 1917–1991*, a prizewinning study of the conflicts between deafness and Soviet ideology, by Warwick historian Dr. Claire Shaw; while Dr. Susan Grant (Liverpool John Moores) received a prestigious Wellcome Trust Investigator Award for her project “Growing Old in the Soviet Union, 1945–1991,” which commenced in January 2019.

### **The Shape of Russian Studies**

This report aims to provide a broad overview of Russian studies at the fifteen UK universities that still offer degree-level courses in Slavic (here, primarily Russian) language and culture. In Scotland, these are St Andrew’s, Glasgow, and Edinburgh. In England, they are Birmingham; Bristol; Cambridge; Durham; Exeter; Leeds; Manchester; Nottingham; Oxford; Queen Mary, University of London; Sheffield; and the Russian center at University

College London (known as UCL SSEES or simply SSEES). In addition, the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) has very recently (in 2014) started offering Russian as part of its Modern Languages degree course, with a core team of three staff including two researchers; in 2018, UCLan opened the Vladimir Vysotsky Centre for Russian Studies to promote Russian culture. Many other British universities offer clusters of expertise in Russian area studies, but without offering any Russian or Slavic languages; others offer Russian language as an evening class, but not a degree component, in their associated language centers. Some do both: for example, the University of East Anglia has several key specialists in Russian history and politics in its School of History, but Russian language is offered only to GCSE level via evening classes on the UEA Language Programme. Wales and Northern Ireland no longer offer degree courses in Slavic languages or literature, although in several institutions, students can study Russian language as an extracurricular element, as, for example, at the Language Centre in Queen's University Belfast. For the sake of concision, my overview will examine only the fifteen universities in possession of well-established Russian departments with permanent degree programs in Russian language and culture.

Some of these institutions offer one or more alternative Slavic languages as well (at Nottingham, for example, Slovene, Serbian, and Croatian are all offered to degree level; at Bristol, Czech; at Cambridge, Polish and Ukrainian; at Oxford, Polish, Czech, Slovak, and special courses in several other Slavonic languages, including Bulgarian and Macedonian). While core teaching staff at all fifteen departments have specialization in Slavic literature as well as language, other cultural studies specializations are rarer and tend to be tied to an individual researcher's interests rather than to a specific post. For instance, film studies thrives at Cambridge, Sheffield, and Queen Mary, University of London, largely due to the research interests of current staff members (such as Cambridge's Professor Emma Widdis and Queen Mary's Professor Jeremy Hicks) rather than specific provisions by the universities concerned; endowed chairs in Slavic studies are exceptional in themselves. Named posts in Slavic linguistics are also relatively rare: with the exception of Edinburgh, where Professor Larissa Ryazanova-Clarke teaches courses in the subject, linguistics tends to be offered only in the larger Slavic departments (including Sheffield, Oxford, and Cambridge).

It can be assumed that each of these fifteen departments have sufficient staff numbers to offer undergraduate students either single or joint honors degrees in at least one Slavic language. All offer an honors degree (a four-year undergraduate course) in Russian Studies, which typically includes a year of study abroad—normally the third year—in Russia and/or the country of the student's secondary language. Some British universities have one or more partner universities in Russian where they typically send Year Abroad

students; the majority use RLUS or similar student placement programs. RLUS ([www.rlus.co.uk](http://www.rlus.co.uk)) is a long-established educational charity that organizes visas, accommodation (including homestays) and language course of up to nine months' duration for British students in Russia. Occasionally, students may be reluctant to go to Russia for fear of victimization on the grounds of race or sexuality; in these cases, their home departments recommend alternative Russophone courses of study in Estonia, Latvia, or other former Soviet states. All fifteen departments also offer postgraduate supervision to PhD level on Slavic-related research; some offer Masters-level modules that form optional components of wider Masters degrees (such as Cambridge's MPhil in European Literature and Culture), while others offer standalone postgraduate degrees in Russian Studies. Russian has benefited from the growth of Translation Studies at graduate level, as many students pursuing MA degrees in translation take modules on literary or commercial translation from Russian. This is a popular route for Russian graduates. The UTREES database, maintained by the MHRA, catalogues 5,600 doctoral and selected masters theses from British and Irish universities.

Most Slavic studies departments in Britain will offer their students both Modern Languages degrees, which include Russian with another language, and Joint Honors degrees, which combine Russian language with another subject, such as History or Comparative Literature. All Russian departments will accept students at beginner level in Russian language; some, such as Exeter, Birmingham, Oxford, and Cambridge, will stream those students who possess a prior A-Level or equivalent qualification in Russian separately from the beginners for the first part of their degree (often merging the streams in the final year, after the student's Year Abroad). Several of these institutions also include Slavic research centers, such as CREES at Birmingham (which focuses on Area Studies), Glasgow's Centre for Russian, Central and East European Studies (CRCEES), the School of Slavonic and East European Languages (SSEES) within University College London (UCL), the Bakhtin and Prokhorov Centres at Sheffield, and the Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre (RESC) in St Antony's College, Oxford. The Complete Universities Guide—an annual survey of UK undergraduate courses in terms of factors such as student satisfaction, graduate destinations, and academic research quality—in 2019 listed the following Slavic departments as the best in UK (it excluded St Andrews from its calculations), in declining order: Cambridge, Oxford, Durham, Manchester, and Exeter. In surveying Slavic studies provision in the UK, I will dwell briefly on all fifteen institutions, focusing on staff numbers, average student numbers (where known), academic specializations, and (where relevant) the existence of affiliated research centers.<sup>1</sup>

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1. All information has been derived from the web pages of the university departments themselves. The author takes responsibility for any errors or accidental misrepresentations.

### Scotland—Edinburgh, Glasgow, and St Andrew's

The three Scottish universities that still offer Russian language teaching offer, between them, a complete range of Russian studies specializations. The University of Edinburgh has a small core Russian department, with three full-time permanent staff and three part-time tutors. It also hosts the Dashkova Centre, described below. The University of Glasgow has recently appointed two full-time research staff in Russian studies as well as a Russian language instructor; additionally, Glasgow offers both undergraduate and postgraduate degree options in Central and East European Studies, which sits within the University's School of Social and Political Sciences. Students may choose modules from history, politics and sociology, and study Hungarian, Polish, and Czech as well as Russian. CRCEES, a government-funded research center affiliated to the Department of Central and East European Studies, is managed by CEES research staff in order to run research seminars, cooperate with international partners, and facilitate knowledge exchange, researcher networking and academic internships. Current research projects under the auspices of CRCEES include "Intimate Migration," a study investigating intra-European LGBT migration, and the self-explanatory "Poland's Kin-State Policies: Opportunities and Challenges."<sup>2</sup> CRCEES is associated with the prestigious journal *Europe-Asia Studies*, which has been edited from Glasgow since 1949. The Russian department at St Andrew's University in eastern Scotland has six permanent staff members with an average intake of sixty undergraduates a year. Unusually, all six staff are specialized in Russian cultural studies. St Andrew's offers a Masters program in Russian language and literature, which is open to graduate students with and without Russian, and a one-year M. Litt degree in Central and Eastern European Studies, which allows students to choose modules from the disciplines of Russian, Modern History, Art History, and International Relations. St Andrew's also boasts its own research center, the Centre for Russian, Soviet, Central and Eastern European Studies, which hosts regular graduate seminars. All three Scottish Slavic Studies departments benefit from the cultural work of the Princess Dashkova Russian Centre housed at the University of Edinburgh, which includes a research library and a cross-disciplinary research group that aims to enhance Russian-Scottish cultural exchange and encourage Russian language learning (it is named after Catherine II's friend Ekaterina Dashkova, who lived in Edinburgh for two years while her son studied at the University).

### England—The Big Five

The biggest Slavic departments in England in terms of staff numbers are UCL SSEES, Oxford, and Cambridge, followed by Birmingham and Durham.

2. For more information on these and other projects, see the CRCEES website at <https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/cees/projects/>.

- UCL (University College London) contains the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), which houses well over sixty full- and part-time research and teaching staff as well as the SSEES Library and Video and DVD collection. The latter is an important resource for UK Slavic Film Studies: the Russian Cinema Research Group, led by Dr. Philip Cavendish and Dr. Rachel Morley, both SSEES staff, has hosted over 100 speakers since its foundation. The RCRG is one of nine active research seminars run by SSEES. The school's remit extends to Baltic, South Slavic and Eastern European languages and cultures, including Hungarian. SSEES publishes a monograph series and several peer-reviewed journals, including *Slavonic and East European Review* and *Central Europe*, in addition to a postgraduate journal, *Slovo*.
- The Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages at the University of Oxford offers degree courses in Russian, Czech (with Slovak) and Polish, all from either beginner or intermediate level, as well as a wide range of graduate supervision. Approximately a dozen permanent, full-time staff work within these three language areas, with specializations including historical Slavonic linguistics, musicology, Russian drama, and Russian cultural history. The Oxford School of Global Area Studies contains a unit dedicated to Russian and East European Studies (REES), which offers graduate courses to PhD level in the history, politics, economics, international relations, society and culture of this area. Additionally, St Antony's College, Oxford hosts the Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre, which runs regular seminars for graduate students in Russian Studies and also sponsors the Max Hayward Visiting Fellowship, a stipendiary post for researchers.
- The Slavonic Studies Section at the University of Cambridge was founded in 1900 with, oddly enough, a grant from the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers. It is now one of the most diverse and research-active Slavic departments in the world, including twenty-six full- and part-time academic staff and its own research center, CAMCREES (the Cambridge Committee for Russian and East European Studies, founded in 1987), which hosts regular seminars from visiting speakers. Research and teaching specializations include Pre-Modern East Slavic culture; Polish, Russian and Ukrainian language and literature (all offered as undergraduate degree components); Slavonic Linguistics; Nationalism Studies; Film and Visual Culture; and Memory Studies.
- Birmingham, despite possessing the CREES research center mentioned above, has a fairly small core Russian language and culture teaching staff, with three permanent members responsible for a total cohort of approximately 120 undergraduates across each of the four years of study. CREES, which includes specialists not only in Slavic aspects of Political Science and International Studies (including Law), but also Anthropology and En-



vironmental Studies, offers both PhD and MPhil programs in Russian and Eastern European Studies (including history, politics, and sociology).

- Durham University's Russian Department has six permanent members of teaching staff as well as a number of research fellows. The department has particular research strengths in the history of Russian education and humanities, as well as the study of Russian Silver Age poetry. Through the Russkiy Mir Centre, founded in 2013 as a joint project between the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Durham University, Durham promotes interdisciplinary study of Russian culture (by including, for example, Slavic-oriented researchers from the University's Departments of History and Musicology). The department offers Russian Studies supervision at both MA and PhD level.

### **England—The Smaller Slavic Departments**

The following is a very brief attempt to sketch the shape and major research interests of the six remaining UK universities with distinct Slavic or Russian Studies departments (not counting the University of Central Lancashire, mentioned separately above). There is a clear pattern: all the smaller departments have at least one, and normally up to four, permanent, full-time members of staff who combine research and teaching. The bulk of language instruction is carried out by one or more native-speaker language instructors. In spite of their small size, these Slavic Studies departments tend to be disproportionately research-active, with many colleagues leading large, externally-funded research projects, such as Dr. Rajendra Chitnis' Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded investigation "Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations" (2014–2016) at Bristol or Professor Katharine Hodgson's AHRC project "Reconfiguring the Canon of Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry, 1991–2008" (2010–2013).

- The University of Bristol's Russian Department additionally offers degree courses in Czech and Slovak; it has over eleven full-time teaching staff, including a Chair in Russian. Research specializations include Russian literature from the eighteenth century to the present, Czech and Slovak literature and culture, Russian intellectual history from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century, Russian Orthodox theology and culture, gender in Russian literature and culture, and translation studies.
- The University of Exeter has a Russian program with four permanent members of staff (three full-time researchers and one part-time language instructor), which sits within the Department of Modern Languages. The total cohort of undergraduates across all four years is typically between sixty and eighty students; the majority of graduate students include modules in Russian within a degree in translation studies (MA or PhD). Trans-

lation studies, nineteenth-century Russian literature, the formation of the Soviet poetic canon, and British-Soviet cultural relations are all research specializations of the Department.

- Russian has been taught at the University of Leeds since 1918, currently as the Russian and Slavonic subsection of the School of Languages, Cultures, and Societies. There are fewer than five permanent staff, but courses are offered at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The University also hosts the Leeds Russian Centre, which brings together Slavic studies specialists from across the University. Leeds is also notable for the Leeds Russian Archive, established in 1982, which houses over 650 archives relevant to Anglo-Russian relations since 1800.
- The University of Manchester currently has three full-time permanent academic staff and a number of language instructors and research fellows within Russian and East European Studies. Their specializations include contemporary Russian media studies and Russian popular culture; gender studies; Balkan studies; and medieval Slavic culture, all of which are supported by a dedicated interdisciplinary organization, the Russian and Eurasian Studies Network. The University additionally offers Polish at degree level.
- The Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies at the University of Nottingham has five full-time, permanent research staff and three language lecturers. Besides Russian, the Department offers degree-level tuition in Serbian/Croatian and Slovene. Staff research specializations include early East Slavonic and Byzantine history, religion and culture; late Soviet rock music; and Russian émigré literature and culture.
- Queen Mary, University of London currently has three permanent members of staff in Russian; despite its small size, it has an enviable research profile. QMUL's Russian program was ranked third in the country in 2019 by the Complete University Guide. Another distinctive feature of this department is its annual Russian Play (in 2019, Chekhov's *The Seagull*), performed in Russian by current undergraduates under the direction of (and with the participation of) academic staff.
- The University of Sheffield has seven full-time teaching staff, providing tuition in Polish and Czech as well as Russian; it offers degree courses in Slavic Studies within its School of Languages and Cultures. It also hosts the Bakhtin Centre, founded in 1994 by Professor David Shepherd and currently run by Professor Craig Brandist, which encourages research into the work of Bakhtin and his circle, as well as other literary theorists, including the late Tzvetan Todorov. Sheffield is also (since 2014) home to the Prokhorov Centre, funded by the Prokhorov Foundation currently jointly headed by Professor Evgeny Dobrenko (Russian) and Professor Henk de Berg (German); it describes itself as "the only research forum in the UK with an integrated focus on the intellectual and cultural histories of both

Central and Eastern Europe.”<sup>3</sup> The Centre organizes regular conferences and workshops in addition to the annual Prokhorov Lecture.

## Conclusion

How do we assure a future for Slavic studies in the UK? Senior scholars such as Manchester’s Professor Stephen Hutchings (2017) have argued that academics need to create their own case for sustainability through public engagement initiatives; he also urges universities to open up one-semester or one-year language courses to students from other departments, in order to bolster both recruitment and awareness of the importance of language knowledge. This initiative, similar to the American practice of allowing students to take minors in a wide range of subjects, could be hugely beneficial to recruitment for minority languages like Russian or Polish. In view of the huge geopolitical importance of Slavic studies, we can hope that funding for the existing Centres of Excellence in this field will continue to be ring-fenced; and that state and institutional support for Slavic language and cultural studies will also be maintained. In the meantime, Slavic Studies research in the UK continues to be vibrant, publicly engaged, and outward-looking.

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