

Queer Russia Symposium at Davidson College

On February 16-17, 2018, a symposium “Queer Russia: Gender, Sexuality and Race” was held at Davidson College in North Carolina. The Symposium’s organizer Roman Utkin has gathered together a selection of scholars across the US who are interested in queer topics in Russian culture, society and politics. UW-Madison Russia Project’s post-doctoral research associate Alexander Kondakov took part in the event. The Symposium opened with a keynote lecture by Masha Gessen, winner of the National Book Awards for *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*. She presented excerpts from the book that explain why gays were targeted by policies and law of the current Russian administration.

This discussion of law continued next day with presentations of Kevin Moss (Middlebury College), Jennifer Suchland (Ohio State), Alexander Kondakov (UW-Madison) and Samuel Buelow (Indiana). Moss identified the absence of minoritarian notion of homosexuality in Russia which resulted in the idea that everyone could become gay (for example, through “propaganda” of homosexuality). Suchland coined the term “heteronationalism” and suggested that moving from communism after the collapse of the USSR had been inevitably a move to the political right. Kondakov presented results of his court decisions study that showed a sharp rise in anti-LGBTQ hate crimes in Russia after the adoption of the anti-gay propaganda law in 2013. Buelow traced relations between Russia and neighboring states in Central Asia as legal policies move to the former Soviet states, while queer people move out from there.

In the next panel, Jennifer Wilson (Pennsylvania) and Polina Barskova (Hampshire College) discussed Russian queer literature. Wilson queered Dostoyevsky’s works in the search for transgender instances in discussions of religious group of *skptsy*. Barskova drew attention to Russian lesbian and gay poets, as well as emerging queer poetry in contemporary Russia.

Julie Cassiday (Williams College) and Eliot Borenstein (NYU) marvelously finalized the academic part of the Symposium. Cassiday spoke of a character in Sergey Loban’s movie *The Dust* whose shame and stigma are reinforced throughout the film, and yet he queerly transgresses these post-soviet sentiments at the very end. Borenstein advanced “the right to be frivolous” in his analysis of viral “Satisfaction” video produced by semi-naked Ulyanovsk civil aviation cadets.

The Symposium ended with a screening of short films from the St. Petersburg LGBT Film Festival “Side by Side”. The documentaries under a common title *A Day in the Life* depict everyday challenges of LGBTQ people in Russia.

