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COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

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A Revolution Beyond Borders: The Soviet Art of the Latvian Riflemen

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Research Abstract:

For art historians the first two decades of Soviet art are dominated by the end of modernist experimentation and the turn to a stylistic conservatism used to build a unified image of a heroic socialist Russia. While apparently coherent, this narrative fails to take into account Soviet artists, who instead represented socialist existence as a state of revolutionary and post-national dislocation. My dissertation examines the work of five artists, whose vision of the ideal socialist subject was reflective of their own experience as diasporic Latvians. In order to reconstruct the production, exhibition, and reception of their work, I examined materials in the Moscow archives (RGALI, GARF) in their personal files and in those of the primary organizations in which they were engaged. In the process of this research I uncovered documents revealing the significant role their mobility and their identification as a national minority shaped their work.

Research Goals:

The Title VIII CRLT Fellowship allowed me to pursue both language training and archival research in Moscow. For the language training, my primary goal was to significantly

improve my fluency in Russian with a particular concern for both scholarly discourse and historical Soviet discourse. This language study was intimately related to my research as my goal with it was to facilitate a more nuanced reading of historical documents – especially important in my work due to the specific rhetoric and jargon of Soviet writing – and equip me to engage in serious discussion with Russian-speaking scholars and audiences.

For the archival research, my goals were to reconstruct the context of production, creation, and reception of the work of the Latvian artists Voldemars Andersons, Aleksandr Drevin, Karl Ioganson, Gustav Klucis, and Karlis Veidemanis, who were active in Moscow from 1917 to 1938. At present, only Gustav Klucis is widely known to art historians internationally, though recent work on Ioganson has brought new attention to him by specialists in the Soviet art and Drevin is a relatively well-known painter in Russia. Andersons and Veidemanis, however, have remained little recognized. The disproportionate attention received by these different artists has masked their commonalities and direct personal relationships, and therefore their mutual involvement with a number of organizations and with the Latvian community in Moscow has been little researched. Thus the goal of my archival research was to examine the documents related to the organizations and groups with which they were involved and use these to reconstruct their own perspectives on their work and their national identity, as well as the perspectives of their contemporaries. In the case of Andersons, Drevin, and Veidemanis, archival documents are especially important as a significant number of their works were destroyed due following their arrest and execution (under false charges of fascist-nationalist activities) in 1938.

Beyond this focused study of five artists, my research also engaged with the wider question of the experience of national minorities (in this case Latvians) within Soviet culture of the 1920s and 1930s. Consequently, I hoped to use archival documents to create a portrait of

national identity within the diasporic Latvian community in the Soviet Union and to analyze how it was represented in cultural production. I was particularly concerned with military unit of the Latvian Riflemen, in which my artists served, because its soldiers and later veterans played a key role in the foundation of the Bolshevik state and in the organization of a distinct *Soviet* Latvian culture.

Research Activities

My activity over the summer in Moscow was divided between language study and archival work. For the language study, I met with instructors at Moscow International University for individual sessions 8 hours per week. My instructors and I structured these sessions as much as possible to serve as supplements to my research. In my meetings with instructor Tatiana Shmigelskaia we read primary source texts taken from my own research and discussed their content. This was especially beneficial as she was familiar with period language and institutional abbreviations, which are often difficult to understand or translate independently. We also used several sessions to practice visual analysis of Soviet art works as a preparation for the presentation of my research to Russian-speaking scholars. Overall, the quality of the language instruction I received was excellent and all of the instructors provided additional support well beyond our scheduled hours together. However, the scheduled times of the sessions were difficult to coordinate with archival research. Because the total 8 hours per week were usually divided over 2-3 days and the sessions overlapped with the working hours of the archives located a distance from the university, it was often difficult to work in the archives as many hours per week as I would have liked. Understandably, the MIU instructors' full schedules were difficult to coordinate, but I believe Title VIII CRLT scholars would have more time for their research if their language tutoring is scheduled on a single day.

The majority of my research work took place at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (*Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva*, RGALI) and the State Archive of the Russian Federation (*Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, GARF). I began my initial work at RGALI in May with the personal files of Andersons, Drevin, Klucis, and Veidemanis held there. The most significant files for Klucis and Drevin were from the collection of Vkhutemas and Vkhutein. Vkhutemas (Higher Art and Technical Studios, *Vyshye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie*), which served as the central institution of higher art education in Moscow from 1920-1926 and was later reorganized as Vkhutein (Higher Art and Technical Institute, *Vyshyi khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskii institute*) from 1926-1930, employed both artists as faculty. In addition to their files, I also examined the Vkhutemas files for Nadezhda Udal'tsova, Drevin's wife and creative partner, and Pauls Irbits, fellow Latvian Rifleman artist, art critic and regular colleague of Klucis. For Veidemanis and Andersons, the personal files I examined were part of a collection of artist's questionnaires from 1922-1939, with both of their files dating from 1925. I chose to view these files first as they would help establish general chronologies of the artists' activities and their organizational affiliations during the 1920s.

After my initial work with these personal files, I then examined a series of four photo albums held in RGALI as part of the collection of the poet Alexei Kruchenykh. These photo albums, assembled by Kruchenykh in collaboration with various artists and writers, span a broad period of his creative activity, covering the 1910s-1960s. These were important sources for my research as Klucis, an intimate friend and artistic colleague to Kruchenykh, contributed material to these four albums.

The final file I viewed during my first month of work at RGALI was the report of the Latvian State Theater “Skatuve” to the All-Union Committee for Art Affairs (*Vsesoiuznyi komitet po delam iskusstv*) from 1936. Though 1936 is the only year for which such a report exists, the report contains the most extensive record of the theater’s activities. The report was a significant piece of evidence for my research for two reasons. First, it employed Veidemanis as a set designer and art director from 1924-1937. Second, it was the theater of the Moscow Latvian cultural society “Prometheus” (“*Prometejs*”), which commissioned work from the Latvian Rifleman artists and acted as the nucleus of Latvian cultural activity in the Soviet Union.

After completing my initial work at RGALI in mid-June, I moved to GARF and worked there for the second half of June through the end of July. The GARF collection is divided between two locations, the first housing imperial, all-union Soviet, and post-Soviet documents and the second housing documents from the RSFSR only. As a result, my archival materials were split between these two sites as well. For the last two weeks of June and the first week of July, I worked with RSFSR files in GARF’s reading room 2. Following that I worked in reading room 1 with the All-Union Soviet files through the closure of GARF for its August vacation at the end of July.

In reading room one, I first examined the files from the RSFSR Narkompros (*Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia*, People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment) collection. Narkompros, the central state organ of cultural production, employed Drevin, Veidemanis, and Drevin’s wife Udal’tsova in 1918-1920 and thus had personal files for all three. Within this collection, I also viewed Narkompros’s reports on the activities of “Skatuve.” My primary work, however, focused on the large file from the Narkomnats (*Narodnyi komissariat natsional’nykh men’shinstv*, People’s Commissariat of National Minorities) collection on the Soviet Latvian

cultural-workers conference, 8-14 January 1933. This file, containing reports, speeches and a full transcript of all discussions from the conference, required two weeks to study thoroughly.

In the main GARF reading room, I first viewed the file of materials on the Latvian Riflemen's studio and art group form at the Kremlin in 1918. Following this I examined the files from the Commissariat for Latvian National Affairs (*Komissariat po latyshskim natsional'nim delam*), where Drevin served as head of its short-lived art section in 1918. This file also required significant time for study, as it contained the hand-written minutes of the Commissariat's weekly meetings, which proved difficult to decipher due to the secretarial hand, historical changes in Latvian orthography and frequent use of short-hand. For my last week as GARF, I went through the yearly reports of "Prometheus" to Sovnarkom (*Sovet narodnykh komissarov*, Council of People's Commissars) from 1934-1936.

At the start of August, I focused on studying the paintings of Aleksandr Drevin at the Tretyakov Gallery. The museum is the primary repository of his major works, very few of which appear in collections outside of Russia today. Finally, for my remaining weeks in Moscow before my departure on August 28, I returned to RGALI to investigate the files of the Soviet state art organ Glaviskusstvo (*Glavnoe upravlenie po delam khudozhestvennoi literatury i iskusstva*) from 1926-1930 and the central Moscow artists' union MOSKh from 1932-1938. Within the Glaviskusstvo collection, I looked at records of state art purchases, records of state funded artistic field trips (*komandirovki*), official correspondence and documents from the artists' groups Okiatbr', Bytie, OMKh, AKhRR, in which Andersons, Drevin, Klucis and Veidemanis had been involved. My final week of archival research focused on transcripts of discussions at MOSKh held in 1933 and 1936-1937, in which Drevin and Andersons both spoke at length.

Research Findings

My research in Moscow yielded a number of useful findings, particularly for the reconstruction of the artists' professional activities, the reception of their work, and the position of Latvians within Soviet cultural production. The artists' personal files from Vkhutemas in RGALI and Narkompros contained biographical statements, including a lengthy 1926 autobiography from Klucis. In the case of Andersons and Veidemanis, these documents were especially valuable, as little was previously known about their careers. The emphasis on the Latvian Riflemen's first studio and exhibition given across their biographies testifies to its importance as an originary point for their careers in Moscow. One of the most revelatory pieces of evidence in the early Narkompros files documented Veidemanis's employment in 1919 as the Museum Bureau registrar to oversee the inventory of all current museum collections. Veidemanis's role within the Museum Bureau, previously unknown in scholarship, also coincided with Drevin's tenure as the acting head of the new Museum of Modern Art. Taken together this provides strong evidence that the recently arrived Latvian artists were influential within the initial restructuring of pre-Revolutionary art collections into a new Soviet museum system. Their biographies also provided important new information about their artistic education, which in all of their cases was not linear, but rather broken up between various pre- and post-Revolutionary institutions in Riga, Petersburg and Moscow.

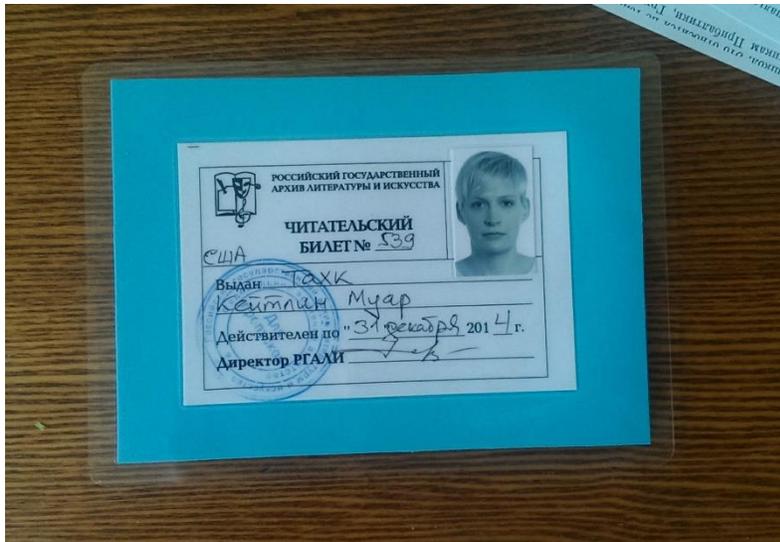


Photo: My pass from RGALI.

The files of the Latvian commissariat in GARF were also fruitful for the study of the Latvian diasporic community in Moscow immediately following the Revolution. From the weekly meeting minutes, I am able to reconstruct the commissariat's activities, which show it to be the central organizing institution for Soviet Latvians in 1918-1919, both politically and culturally. The activities of the commissariat also suggest a divide between the new population of Latvian refugees and soldiers and the old population of Moscow's established pre-WWI Latvian communities. Commissariat records showed that it was almost entirely staffed by and concerned with the former. Similarly, though the commissariat art studio under Drevin's direction was ostensibly open to all Latvians in Moscow, discussions at the weekly meetings show its users were almost exclusively Latvian Riflemen.

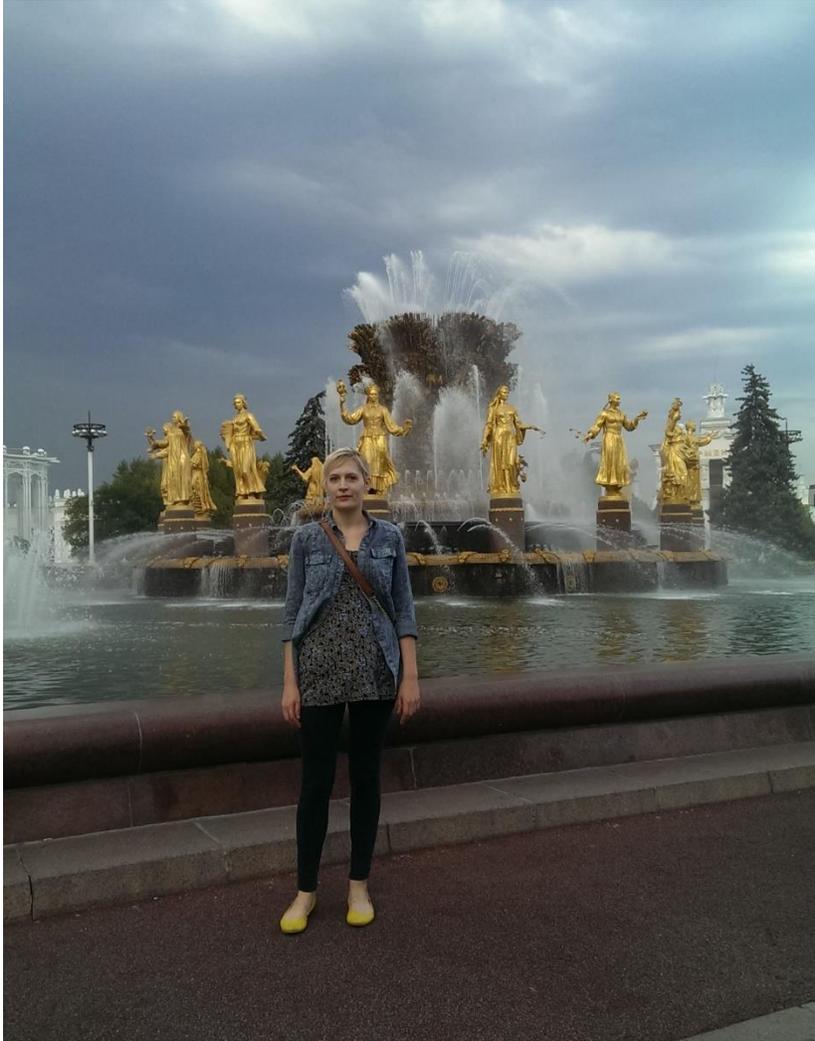


Photo: In front of the “Friendship of Nations” fountain on the VDNKh grounds.

My major findings at GARF came from the files of the 1933 Latvian cultural workers conference and of the “Prometheus” yearly reports. The correspondence around the planning of the 1933 conference, under the direction of “Prometheus,” proves that it was by far the largest organized meeting of Soviet Latvians concerned with education, literature, art, and cultural affairs. Detailed minutes contained within the GARF file record the wide ranging debates held at the conference. My preliminary analysis of these minutes clearly indicates the predominance of linguistic concerns over all others, as the vast majority of the conference is concerned with maintaining and developing the Latvian language. In contrast, the discussion of visual art at the

conference, particularly in statements by Paul Irbits, suggests that unlike literature, current Soviet Latvian art lacks a recognizably national form.



Photo: With fellow Moscow Title VIII CRLT scholar Hannah Chapman.

While the internal records of “Prometheus,” held currently in the Latvian National Archive, are the main source of information about its activities, the organization’s reports to Sovnarkom, held in GARF, provided vital information about its self-representation to external Soviet authorities. Based on the financial records and inventories of “Prometheus,” its publishing house, book stores, and offices, I found that the society acted as almost the sole supporter and distributor of Latvian art and literature in the Soviet Union during this period, reaching its peak of influence in the early-mid 1930s. The records also revealed that its stores served not only the Latvian community, but the broader Moscow population, as more than half of its book sales were of non-Latvian, primarily Russian texts and it supplied paper goods to a large number of institutions with no attachment to the Latvian community. The yearly reports also record artists’ commissions from Prometheus (Andersons, Veidemanis, Drevin and Klucis all received several

major commissions in these years) and inventory the artworks currently owned by the organization. Inventories in the reports document the furnishings, including artworks, in each room of the “Prometheus” headquarters, which enables me to reconstruct the placement of my artists’ works and analyze the role they played within the organization’s public self-representation. Financial records further revealed that both Andersons and Veidemanis resided in apartments run by “Prometheus,” which testifies to their intimate involvement with it.

The files in the RGALI Glaviskusstvo collection concerning state art acquisitions and state-sponsored artists’ *komandirovki* yielded new information about my artists activities between 1926 and 1933. Acquisitions records show several paintings by Andersons, Drevin and Veidemanis to have been purchased by Glaviskusstvo and directed to the collections of the Russian Museum, Tretyakov Gallery, and Museum of the Revolution. Again, for Andersons and Veidemanis this information is particularly revelatory insofar as it suggests that they were not in fact marginal artists, but rather were regarded as major artists by Soviet art officials, particularly in 1926-1930. Marginal notations in the Glaviskusstvo copy of the catalog for the 1929 AkhRR exhibition show they two of Andersons’s six exhibited works were considered for purchase (one ultimately was), a remarkable number given that most artists were not even considered.

Of even greater interest to my project were the records documenting *komandirovki*, state-funded trips to sites throughout the Soviet Union. These trips intended to provide artists with new subject matter from a nation in the process of socialist reconstruction, required summer residence at a remote location, participation in the industry and everyday life of the local population, and the creation of a series of artworks to be submitted to Glaviskusstvo after the artist’s return. The files show that Andersons, Drevin, and Veidemanis applied for summer *komandirovki* every year and as a result travelled repeatedly to sites in Central Asia, the Urals,

Altai, and to collective farms at a number of locations throughout the country. These records show their interest in amassing a body of work that responded to diversity and multiplicity of the Soviet landscape. The Glaviskusstvo files also shows that art officials regarded the *komandirovki* as having the highest ideological significance. Minutes from the supervising committee's meetings show an increasing concern with artists' political education prior to their trips: a political slogan was given for each year's *komandirovki*, artists were assigned specific ideological themes, and in 1931 they were even required to attend a series of preparatory political lectures.

Finally, in the minutes of the MOSKh general meetings, I discovered several major statements by Drevin defining his position on socialist art and defending his own work against charges of formalist deviation. Drevin's statements present a distinctive view of socialist art as one of stimulating collective emotional response. His comments also link naturalist landscape painting with an anti-socialist ethnic Russian nationalist sentiment, which he contrasted with his own style. In a transcript from 1937, also uncovered a laudatory descriptions of his work from the critic Osip Beskin, known for his attacks on Drevin's formalism, which shows a new enthusiastic reception of the artist's work in 1936-37 previously unstudied. The MOSKh discussion of the Industry of Socialism exhibition, a milestone of 1930s Soviet art, also included extended remarks from Andersons, which provide the only evidence of his planned participation (prior to his arrest and execution in January 1938) and the positive reception of his work by the exhibition jury.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

In light of recent events in Ukraine around questions of national identity and political sovereignty, my research has acquired greater contemporary relevance. In the current conflict in

Eastern Ukraine and Crimea, both American and Russian official responses have regularly framed the issues in terms of national or ethnic identities (Ukrainian, Russian, Tatar) and their attachment to fixed geographical areas. In response to the crisis, US leaders and diplomats have frequently claimed to stand with “the Ukrainian people,” yet this group remains poorly defined. The ambiguity of who “the Ukrainian people” in such statements leaves US foreign policy open to the claims of Russian media that our support is directed towards ethnic-nationalist or fascist organizations in Kiev. Moreover, the questions of national identity, which have exacerbated events in Ukraine are not confined there, but extend to large parts of the Soviet Union, where decades of Soviet policies of population redistribution have created linguistically and culturally mixed populations. This is particularly visible in the Baltic States, both in their heightened response to the Ukrainian crisis and their ongoing strained relationships with the Russian Federation.

My research bears directly on these questions, because it implies that categories of national identity in these region are not only fluid, they also may be deployed by individuals in response to different conditions. Narratives of assimilation into the dominant culture or of resistance to and isolation from the dominant culture do not apply to the Latvians in Moscow I studied, who chose to foreground or ignore their national identity at various points. Decades of Soviet policy which frequently shifted its position towards its national minorities and often contradictorily promoted the particularity of national identity and the universality of socialist identity shaped the current populations of the former USSR. As a result, national and ethnic identities that may appear to have been abandoned may suddenly reemerge, and groups that appear to have assimilated into a dominant culture may suddenly reassert there identity, especially in periods of political or social crisis.

Moreover, US foreign policy makers should be cautious about regarding nationalities in the region as unified coherent groups. As my research shows, strong divisions existed between Latvian populations in Soviet Russia from the pre-Revolutionary period, post-Revolutionary immigrant Latvians in Soviet Russia, and Latvians in the Latvian Republic (a later Latvian SSR). While all of these groups identified as Latvian, they often regarded the others as more or less so, and at times identified more strongly with other populations. Additionally, in the case of the first two groups, their national identity was not tied to a fixed national territory (the second group actively chose to remain in the Soviet Union instead of returning to their former homes in Latvia). US foreign policy should be cautious not to define ethnic or national identity as a monolithic whole and exclusively in terms of a “homeland.” This appeal to the homeland serves to marginalize migratory populations and to stimulate ideas of regions “belonging” to a single national (as visible now in the claim that the Crimea peninsula is historically Russia). US diplomacy, I believe, would benefit from establishing positions for specialists who focus on diasporic and immigrant populations in the former Soviet states and whose field of work is transnational, rather than confined to the immigrant and minority populations of a single country.

Finally, the centrality of Latvians to the development of the Soviet Union from its very beginning contradicts that common viewpoint that national minorities were marginal or peripheral to Soviet power. The terms “Soviet” and “Russian” are often used interchangeably in the US. US foreign policy officials should, however, avoid equating the two as this slippage supports the view that contemporary Russian populations are continuing a Soviet policy of occupation and displacement of other nationalities.

Co-Curricular Activity

While my archival research and language study occupied the majority of my time in Moscow, I did have some opportunities to engage with other scholars in the field of Soviet art and cultural history. I attended several sessions held at the Manezh museum between May 13 and June 23 as part of their series on the Soviet avant-garde, “Proektsii avangarda,” which included lectures from a number of prominent Russian and international scholars. I also met personally with young Russian art historians/doctoral students currently engaged in research on Soviet art in the 1920s-1930s. These informal meetings allowed me to network with my Russian academic peers and exchange advice on locating materials in different Moscow archives. I also gave a short, informal interview about my work, which appears on the web journal “Otkrytaia Leva” (openleft.com), run by a group of young Russian scholars with whom I became acquainted.

Conclusions

My work in the Moscow archives represents the first half of my still ongoing dissertation research into the Latvian Rifleman artists work in the 1920s-1930s. New materials from GARF and RGALI, however, support some important initial conclusions. First, the Latvian Rifleman and the wave of Latvian refugees from WWI dominated the leading cultural and political institutions of the Moscow Latvian community, largely displacing the city’s pre-war Latvian population from positions of influence. Consequently, the new Soviet institutions they formed were shaped by their own mobile, transnational perspective. While the Latvian Rifleman artists received prominent support from these Latvian organizations, they also played leading roles in the main Soviet art groups and institutions where their national identity was rarely mentioned. While Latvian writers’ work was marginalized due to language, their visual medium allowed these Latvian artists to present their work as simultaneously addressing their own national minority and a universal socialist audience.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications

The Title VIII CRLT fellowship funded the first portion of my dissertation research in the Moscow archives. At present, I am continuing this research over the academic year 2014-2015 with support from a CLIR Mellon Fellowship. For fall 2014 I am in residence in Riga, Latvia, working at the Latvian National Archives, the Latvian National Library, the Latvian National Museum of Art and the Latvian War Museum. I will return to Moscow to complete my research in the Russian archives and museums in spring 2015. I have recently completed a preliminary chapter of my dissertation based on my summer research in Moscow, which focuses on the theme of spatial displacement in Drevin's work. I hope to present material from this chapter at conferences in spring or fall 2015. I plan to complete the dissertation over the academic year 2015-2016 and defend it in May 2016.

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