



Seminar

## MARGARET LITVIN

Holder of an ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies) Frederick Burkhardt  
Residential Fellowship for Recently Tenured Scholars, SCAS.  
Associate Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature, Boston University, MA

### *Frosty Utopia: Arabic Literature's Russian Connections*

Thursday, 22 October, 4:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall  
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala  
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## ABOUT MARGARET LITVIN

After studying Italian literature and interdisciplinary humanities at Yale University (B.A. 1995), Margaret Litvin worked as a journalist in New Orleans before entering graduate study at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, an interdisciplinary program spanning political theory, philosophy and literature. She studied Arabic at Chicago and at the Center for Arabic Study Abroad in Cairo (2001–02). Her Ph.D. thesis (2006) examined the many reworkings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in postcolonial Egypt, Syria and Iraq and grew into her first book, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost* (Princeton, 2011). Tracing the uses of *Hamlet* in Arabic literature, theatre and political rhetoric, and published just as the 'Arab Spring' uprisings faded into disillusionment, the book shows how Arab intellectuals since the 1960s have seen themselves in Hamlet: their times 'out of joint', their political hopes frustrated by a corrupt older generation.

At Boston University, Litvin teaches Arabic language and literature (in Arabic and in translation), as well as seminars on translation, 'Global Shakespeares' and '1001 Nights in the World Literary Imagination'. She is founding director of the Middle East & North Africa Studies Program in the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies ([bu.edu/mena](http://bu.edu/mena)). Her articles, reviews and artist interviews have appeared in the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, *Critical Survey*, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, *TRI: Theatre Research International*, *PMLA*, several Shakespeare journals and the online venues *Words Without Borders*, *Marginalia Review of Books* and *n+1*.

At SCAS, Litvin will work on her second book, a work of literary history tentatively titled 'Another East: Arab Writers, Moscow Dreams', exploring the history of Arabic literary ties with Russia and the Soviet Union.

## ABSTRACT

Throughout the long twentieth century, Russia has held a central place in Arab literary geography. Not only the translated Russian literary canon but the *idea* of Russia – and then of course the Soviet Union – has exerted a magnetic pull on Arab intellectual life throughout its encounter with western-driven modernity. Russia was a potent exemplar representing both east and west: a civilization that had managed to overtake and in some senses join Europe, without sacrificing its own cultural integrity to western values.

Focusing on Lebanese, Syrian, and Egyptian writers, this talk will explore three revealing moments in the Arab-Russian literary encounter: pre-Soviet connections through literary translations and the Orthodox Church; a Brezhnev-era study abroad experience; and a 1990s effort to reckon with the Soviet dream's demise. These stories remind us of a very recent past when the intellectual world was configured differently, when Moscow played a significant role (as it now seeks to do again) in channeling the aspirations of Arab peoples. Yet they also show artists selecting and metabolizing their own influences, not always the way policymakers intended. Reading between the (bread)lines, we can see how early readings helped structure – but ultimately worked to disenchant – Arab writers' own experiences of Russian or Soviet life.