Title: Decoding the 1920s: A Textbook for Advanced learners of Russian
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Abstract:
I will present an Open Access textbook for advanced learners of Russian that I developed at Portland State University. The textbook focuses on the literature on 1920's. This period is a major part of the Russian literary canon but is notoriously difficult for American students to read in the original, due both to its stylistic complexity and its hidden cultural references. Yet, the period is crucial for understanding Russia – not only in the Soviet period, but also today. The 1920's and 1930's were the period when writers like Zoshchenko, Babel and Platonov meticulously documented the birth of the Soviet man, his "newspeak" and Soviet bureaucratese. Writers like Babel introduced jargon into their prose, portraying both regional dialects (e.g., Odessa Russian) and social dialects (mobster Russian). These varieties of language have not disappeared. Moreover, many texts from 1920's and 1930's (e.g., Bulgakov's "Heart of a Dog" or Mandelshtam's poetry) gave rise to catch phrases that get used (or misused and manipulated) constantly in contemporary Russian media, everyday conversations, the speech of ordinary citizens and politicians alike. Thus, the Russian literature of 1920's and 1930's does not belong exclusively to the past, but has relevance and interpretive power for the present. American students who wish to pursue a career in media analysis, national security, analytical translation, journalism, or international relations need to understand this period, and the linguistic patterns established in this period. The talk will present various assignments from the textbook that help students decipher the texts and its cultural nuances, and discuss the ways in which the methods developed by Olga Kagan and her co-authors informed and inspired the approach used in the textbook.