



Fall 10-2-2014

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Recommended Citation

Schlenker, Charlie, "Marina Balina" (2014). *Interviews for WGLT*. 21.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/wgl_t_interviews/21

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WGLT Interview with Marina Balina, October 2, 2014

Charlie Schlenker: The Isaac Funk endowed professor at Illinois Wesleyan University is Marina Balina, a Professor of Russian Studies at Illinois Wesleyan University. She is one of the directors of the symposium looking at, “The Freedom to Speak, Create, and Dream: 25 years of human experience since the fall of the Iron Curtain. There are so many themes to consider: political negotiation, ethnic conflict, identity, creative arts, huge effects in all of these areas. How do you even frame the discussion since these factors tend to be interdependent?

Marina Balina: You ask political questions and think about implications of these political questions in cultural development, you ask cultural questions, and immediately issues of ethnicity, new identity, old versus new identity, coming to the surface, so all these questions are interrelated and the idea to explore those questions should be also a complex one.

Schlenker: How has the resurgence of expressions of ethnic identity resulted in shaping of cultures?

Balina: It is a very complicated question and I don't think that the area we are exploring, the geographical area that sort of emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union after the fall of the Berlin Wall, would be unique to it. I think that the entire world is facing a lot of issues related to ethnic identity, so I believe that ethnicity and history of formation of ethnic identity should be at the core of cultural and political issues discussed.

Schlenker: The resurgence in ethnic identities is driven by a couple different things, depending on where you are. In portions of the former Eastern bloc, it's the lifting of the central controls that suppressed ethnic identities for decades and decades. In other areas it's a response to globalization and the perceived contamination of western culture into traditional cultures. How did those two things mix in the areas on the fringes where both might apply?

Balina: I would not agree with your first statement. Ethnic identity was never suppressed, but ethnic identity was over-imposed, for example, for the countries of the former Soviet Union, the Soviet identity that was much more important than any other ethnic identity in the eyes of the ruling party, that was what imposed on top of it. But ethnic identity was hidden, but never, it has never gone away. In this new post-communist world, ethnic identity sometimes plays a very positive role because this is the awakening of nations and unification around values that were historically part of this or that ethnicity. On the other hand, sometimes ethnic identity and the desire to establish the values of ethnic identity could be detrimental, and we have seen it in many different instances in the former Soviet bloc countries. They led to revolts and they led two ethnic cleansings. For example, the former Yugoslavia is famous for that, but not only that, look at what is happening right now in Ukraine and the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

Schlenker: Since the wall fell in Germany, the economic landscape there has been shaped by small companies in the former East German states and not a lot of large companies moving in. Gross domestic product in the Eastern states is a third lower than the West German states. How is this have-not continuing to make the unification of Germany a problematic work in progress?

Balina: You know, you sort of direct your questions over to economic issues, but I believe those issues should be directed more toward cultural issues because cultural issues that shape present landscape and geography. I myself am partially the product of GDR educational system, I spent some sufficient time coming from the Soviet Union and studying in the former GDR and you see, I'm not using the word, "reunification", I'm using the word "unification" when I'm talking about Germany because I believe what happened after the fall of the Berlin Wall was the true unification of two states that went two absolutely opposite ways in development. It was the resistance to peak investment, it is the feeling of dissolution because many entrepreneurial desires of East Germans had to be put on the backburner because the whole process of economic development wasn't in the hands of their western partners and I am using the word, "partners", in a very careful way because not always this partnership was done on an equal base. But, 25 years later, I believe that Germany is doing anything and everything to overcome these cultural differences, that's cultural differences again, not political differences, and the country is truly feeling united.

Schlenker: Even though there is still a look down your nose at the Aussies?

Balina: Yeah, but the Aussies are equally guilty, if this is the correct word, because *Ostalgie*, this is the very strong feeling for the glo-, well glorious, I'm ironic of course, glorious past of the GDR. They feel sometimes that they aren't included into the process and they refuse to learn, so are the Aussies, who also feel that superiority over their Eastern neighbors, if you want.

Schlenker: One of your own areas of study is Russian children's literature. How have the economic scriptures that have developed shaped the books that children or their parents find appealing?

Balina: First what happened after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the whole market of children's books collapsed because everything what Russian leaders wanted to read were the Western books and the dominant products on the market were the translations, the Western translations. But with Western translations came something very positive, for example, there were questions in areas that were completely, if not forbidden, than not discussed by Soviet children's literature. For example, family differences, parents could be one parent, it could be same gender parents, I mean families are composed of completely different models and the whole series of books out there was led by an outstanding Russian contemporary writer, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, who really discussed issues of difference. Another issue that also started to be discussed was the issue of inequality. Under the Soviet rule, everybody was considered to be equal, although it was never true, but issues of inequality started to come to the surface. Now

children's books include tragic moments, children's books started to include issues of death and how to deal with death and how to deal with death, issues of religion for example, that were also never touched by the Soviet children's literature. I mean, a multitude of books started to address new topics, new ideas if you want, providing children and adults with tools on how to talk about important life problems.

Schlenker: With the ability to talk about themes, like inequality, there may be cultural pressures to change inequality. Civil institutions are not always free from corruption in the former Eastern bloc countries. Is the ability to talk about that starting to lead change in ways to strengthen those institutions or to reduce the inequality that is endemic in certain parts of countries?

Balina: Yes, the new generation is growing up and the generation that is much more in tune with everything that is happening around them and they are less ready to close their eyes to issues of inequality or issues of difference. I was working with a scholar from Berlin, Germany, from Humboldt University, who is doing research on Polish literature and Polish picture books that are dedicated to the Holocaust. Holocaust as a subject was for decades not even touched in Polish history or Polish memory, but it started to come to the surface. Children of this generation who are coming of age right now, not only are they able to learn about those events, but they are also able to make contributions to organizations that take care of memorials. This is the civil movement that is very very strong in contemporary Poland, for example right now, by the way it is very strong in Russia as well because such an example as name graves of victim of World War II, or how it was called in Russia, "Great Patriotic War", they were discovered in many areas, such as Belarus, Ukraine, and even central Russia, and those graves sites were not always grave sites of Soviet soldiers, they are mass graves of German soldiers as well, and together with German youth, Russian youth is working on burying the remains and creating some kind of memorials because victims are equal victims on both sides.

Schlenker: Marina Balina is the Isaac Funk endowed professor, a Professor of Russian Studies at Illinois Wesleyan University. Thanks for joining us.

Balina: Thank you for having me.

Schlenker: I'm Charlie Schlenker.