



9-23-2010

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Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "International Colloquium: A Meeting of Minds, Ideas, Cultures, Disciplines" (2010). *News and Events*. 1472.

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International Colloquium: A Meeting of Minds, Ideas, Cultures, Disciplines

September 23, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – An idea knows no language. A thought does bend to borders or nations. Yet to share ideas, we must work to transcend such human challenges as location and language. This sharing of ideas was the aim of an international colloquium last week on the campus of Illinois Wesleyan University. A group of scholars journeyed 5,000 miles from the Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU) in Moscow to Bloomington to work together at a colloquium titled, "Childhood and Globalization."

"We all share a common goal, to understand and describe both our diverse history and the current realities of the childhood experience in a rapidly changing, global existence," said Illinois Wesleyan's Isaac Funk Professor of Russian Studies Marina Balina. "Our colloquium provided those colloquium participants and our audience participating with a unique opportunity for the immediate exchange of ideas on this important subject."

It was Balina's works that planted the seed for the colloquium. An academic author of books and articles on childhood in the Soviet Union, her publications are printed in English, German, Italian and Russian. It was while working in Germany that Russian scholar Professor Vitaly Bezrogov became familiar with (discovered) Balina's book on children's literature that was published by Routledge Press in English. "I 'knew her' through her publications on life-writing genres many years before I met her," said Bezrogov, who is studying the nuances of textbooks and readers designed for schoolchildren. "We began to actively correspond in late 2007, but did not have a chance to meet until 2009." The two met face-to-face when Bezrogov invited Balina to an interdisciplinary conference in Moscow. It was there they decided they wanted to bring scholars to Illinois Wesleyan with the aim of exchanging ideas on childhood.

The result was the weeklong colloquium at Illinois Wesleyan, which was a mixture of reading discussions and scholarly presentations. Each day of the colloquium carried a different theme surrounding childhood – from images from childhood to theoretical approaches.

"This feels like the U.N."

During one discussion in the Cartwright Room of Illinois Wesleyan University's Memorial Center, comments and concepts flowed through the air in Russian and English, slowed only by the quiet translations by Balina. "This sounds a bit like the U.N.," a student observing the dialogue whispered as she watched Balina speak into a headset, sending her words to earpieces of the RGGU visitors. Scholars on this day at the table devoted time to the topic of "childhood and political action" with a group discussion of the book *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* by Steven Mintz.

The room, normally dominated only by a large table of smooth wood, was surrounded by dozens of chairs as students lined the walls and listened intently. Many of the students came from Associate Professor of History April Schultz's class on Revolution in American Childhood and Family. Schultz, who moderated the colloquium's discussion session, said she had not taught the class in a while, but resurrected it this semester specifically so that students could be involved in the colloquium. All students taking the class this semester have been assigned *Huck's Raft*. "I loved the idea that the students could see what an academic discussion looks like, especially with the cross-national aspect," said Schultz.

Co-organizer of the colloquium and Illinois Wesleyan Associate Professor of French and Italian Scott Sheridan said he appreciated seeing the students at the meeting. "Even watching the mechanics of the discussion provided them something new. Not that many students see this kind of simultaneous interpretation of a text."

Students from all over the campus attended many of the sessions of the colloquium. Helen Ruopp, a senior math major from Downer's Grove, Ill., went to a presentation session with clips shown from *First Squad: The Moment of Truth*, a contemporary in Japanese anime style that depicts a group of Russian children with supernatural abilities at the dawn of World War II. "I didn't know what to expect from the film," said Ruopp. "I really liked it. It inspired me to find out more about the colloquium."/p>

Finding a Common Language

The colloquium represented more than a meeting of different languages and cultures – but of different disciplines as well. Professors' backgrounds ranged from education to psychology and anthropology. Berzorgov noted the multi-discipline approach to the colloquium posed challenges. "In doing so, we must decide on a language for each discussion, and I am not just talking about Russian and English," he said. "Do we use the psychological terminology, or the sociological terminology for an age group? Even in so simple terms, we have to agree how to speak, both in different languages and in academic methodology."

The opportunity to discuss work with scholars from so many different backgrounds pleased participants, including Oxana Gavrishina, an associate professor of the history and theory of culture at RGGU. "I have found speaking with the American scholars very interesting, but more than that, I love being able to work with Russian scholars from my own university who come from different areas," said Gavrishina, who is studying the cultural history of family photography in American and the former Soviet Union.

From Child Soldiers to Juvenile Justice

Scholarly presentations ran a gamut of topics pertaining to the idea of childhood. During one session, participants heard of the mythology of child soldiers in the U.S.S.R, the present-day work of Moscow's Civil Assistance Committee with Chechnyan refugee children, and the proposed juvenile court system in Russia. "Juvenile justice meets opposition in Russia, because it is seen as destroying the family. It is seen as a new mechanism for government [to be involved] in conflict in families" said Maria Tendriakova, RGGU, presenting "Childhood at the Crossroads: Between Family Tradition and State Politics."

Other presentations included Bezrogov and Galina Makarevich talking about "Sovietism, Russianness, and Globality in the Concept of Childhood: Analyzing Cover Pages of Elementary Schoolbooks in Russia from 1976 through 2006;" Gavrishina, who presented "Images of Childhood in the 20th Century Photography;" and "Life After Death: Depiction of Soviet Young Pioneers in Contemporary Cartoons" by Russian scholar Svetlana Leont'eva.

Events throughout the week took place outside the conference rooms of Illinois Wesleyan and Illinois State University (ISU). The group visited the Early Childhood Center in Urbana, Ill., and took in opportunities to do local research. "This has been a wonderful experience, and not just because of the colloquium, but because of the people I've met and the resources I've found" said Bezrogov, who did research at The Ames Library, ISU's Milner Library and visited a teacher at Bent Elementary School in Bloomington. "I'm excited to speak with the organizers of the Digital Commons" said Gavrishina of growing digital collection from The Ames Library. Back home in Russia, Gavrishina is working on a project to digitize family albums.

To bring the scholars to the United States, Balina was able to use funds from her Isaac Funk endowed professorship, and support from the University's Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures Department, International Studies Program as well as Illinois State University's English Department. Bezrogov was able to secure a travel fund from RGGU. Balina hopes the joint efforts are simply the beginning of a long-term academic relationship. "This exceptional intellectual climate will foster future collaboration that will continue long after this initial dialogue is over" she said, adding that, after a similar colloquium in Moscow, Russia in 2011, the group plans to create a volume of articles from the colloquium dedicated to the themes of childhood.

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