

## Julia Obertreis

Our dear colleague Julia Obertreis, Professor of Modern and East European history at the Alexander-Friedrich-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany, died far too young after a serious illness with cancer in Berlin on October 11, 2023.

Julia was born on September 28, 1969 in Solingen and went to school in Ratingen in West Germany. Still a child of the Cold War, she became fascinated by Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika reforms and the gradual opening of the Soviet Union during glasnost. She chose to study history and Russian philology at the Free University of Berlin from 1988 and at the State University of St. Petersburg from 1993 to 1994. After graduating from university in 1996, she became involved in project work at the German-Russian Exchange Association based in Berlin that supported Russian NGOs and welfare institutions.

During these exciting years of opening and transition, she travelled a lot through the Soviet Union, Russia and Central Asia. She fell in love with Leningrad/St. Petersburg—a love that inspired her research and remained, not least because of the close friends she met in Russia's gateway to the west. Also, it was the city of Viktor Tsoi, the hero of the young Russian perestroika generation whose music Julia loved to listen to so much. After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, brave peterburgtsy sprayed Tsoi's face on a house wall. Julia sent me a picture of it, cheering this defiant civilian act in her beloved city of "Peter."

Leningrad/St. Petersburg became the focus of her research interest. Anyone who travelled to Russia in the 1990s can vividly imagine that Julia's interest in housing conditions after the Bolshevik coup d'état in October 1917 came from her own living experiences during a 3-month-stay together with her friend Barbara in a room of a *kommunalka* in 1992. The *khoziaika* still kept a very Soviet eye on the communal flat and scolded the two friends for not locking the many locks on the front door properly. These lingering practices thus raised many questions for Julia about everyday Soviet life and living, ultimately leading to her dissertation that was supervised by Prof. Klaus Meyer and defended at the Free University of Berlin in 2001. Julia analyzed the transformation of the young Soviet society on the basis of housing policy from 1918 to 1937. Informed by cultural history, Julia combined social and micro history with *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of the everyday) to show that the Soviet regime eventually failed to educate the New Man. Not surprisingly, the German Society for East European Studies awarded Julia the Young Researchers Prize for her book in 2002, lauding the innovative approach.

Before Julia took up a position as a research assistant to Prof. Bernd Bonwetsch, the chair at Ruhr University of Bochum in 2002, she worked as a freelancer on several oral history-projects. Theories and methods of oral history became central to her work. Together with Anke Stephan, she edited a volume exploring post-socialist memory cultures based on interviews. Her work with interviews reflected her interest in people, which was just as important in her academic work as it was in her approach toward students, colleagues, and friends.

From 2004 to 2012, she was assistant professor of Modern and Eastern European History at the University of Freiburg, chaired by Prof. Dietmar Neutatz. In these years, she completed her habilitation project exploring cotton cultivation and irrigation in Central Asia during Russian and Soviet rule. A long perspective of 130 years enabled

her to highlight continuities and changes from the imperial to the Soviet periods in concepts of mastering nature, local scopes of action, and expert training. Her book, *Imperial Desert Dreams: Cotton Growing and Irrigation in Central Asia, 1860–1991*, published in 2017, not only explores central aspects of Soviet imperialism, environmental history, and the history of technology, but is a highly valuable contribution to the discussion of global high modernity.

In 2012, Julia Obertreis was appointed Chair of Modern and Eastern European history at the Friedrich-Alexander University in Erlangen-Nuremberg. This was a time when Julia discovered further fields of research that reflected her curiosity and openness towards new topics. She was passionate about socialist television; she started to work on water infrastructures in Central Asia and St. Petersburg, as well as on the history of smoking in Russia and the Soviet Union in global perspective.

Julia did not shirk work, on the contrary, she felt responsible for the big picture. She aimed to break up the old power structures and, as a feminist, campaigned for equal opportunities and took on numerous tasks and positions. She was an Editorial Board member of the *Slavic Review* and a series editor. She served as department spokeswoman, as member of the faculty council, as equal opportunities officer at her university, and was elected as the first chairwoman of the Association of Historians of Eastern Europe (*Verband der Osteuropahistorikerinnen und -historiker e.V.*). From 2015 to 2021, she represented the interests of the east European history discipline and engaged in political debates. Generally, Julia was a political person, a feminist fighting wholeheartedly for equal rights and diversity at the university and in everyday life. As a committed member of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, she also stood up for her values in direct dialogue with people during street campaigns.

The Russian attack on Ukraine tragically coincided with her cancer diagnosis. Regardless of her personal fate, she devoted a great deal of her energy to explaining the historical origins of the war to the non-academic public, and supporting Nuremberg's twin city, Kharkiv, and assisting Ukrainian colleagues.

When Julia was on a conference program, you could be sure that you would hear not only interested questions and stimulating comments on your presentation during the coffee breaks, but that there was always something to laugh about with her. Her open, cordial, and always collegial manner made her a unique colleague. She always had an open ear for problems and concerns—both scientific and human—and was always ready to offer help and advice. Julia always treated people with kindness and human interest that went much beyond scientific questions. We have lost a highly valued and much-loved colleague and friend. We are saddened by her untimely death and will never forget her.

KIRSTEN BÖNKER  
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## Marianna Tax Choldin

Scholar-librarian Marianna Tax Choldin (1942–2023), Mortenson Distinguished Professor Emerita at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, an important figure in Slavic and international librarianship, died July 1 following a stroke. She was 81 and is survived by her husband, Harvey Choldin, her identical twin daughters, Kate Tax Choldin and Mary Tax Choldin, her sister, Susan Tax Freeman, and four grandchildren. The daughter of prominent University of Chicago anthropologist Sol Tax,

founding editor of *Current Anthropology*, she was born and grew up in a self-described academic bubble in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood close to that university where she was educated from elementary school through her PhD. In 2016 she published her absorbing memoir and narrative of her work in Russia titled *Garden of Broken Statues: Exploring Censorship in Russia* (Academic Studies Press) and added other personal recollections during subsequent widely reported book talks and interviews. A persistent theme in the book is contemplation on her Jewish heritage and her grandparents who emigrated from parts of the Russian empire around 1900. Especially moving are her recollections of collaborating with her dear friend of twenty-five years, Ekaterina Genieva ("Katia"), the remarkable director of Moscow's Library of Foreign Literature. Marianna's obituary of Katia appeared in the Spring 2016 issue of *Slavic Review*.

Marianna's serendipitous career as a librarian began when despite her lack of formal training, she was recruited to be half-time Slavic bibliographer at the Michigan State University library. When Harvey accepted an offer in 1969 from the Sociology department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Marianna had the opportunity to join the staff of that institution's prestigious library, the largest state university library in the country where she would spend her entire 32-year professional career. Thanks mainly to the heroic initiatives of Ralph Fisher, founding director of the Russian Center, the library had over a period of ten years built a Slavic collection which we would soon advertise as the largest in the country west of Washington DC. In 1970, a year after Marianna began working in our Slavic Division, we moved into one of the two spacious rooms adjacent to the monumental main reading room, and our Room 225 became home for the next forty years to the newly designated Slavic and East European Library. Already in summer 1970, the room served as a demonstration laboratory for a federally-funded six-week Slavic Library Institute to train a new generation of Slavic specialists. Marianna was an attentive observer of the lectures, and three of the students became close associates and helped in her persistent efforts to promote cooperation among Slavic specialist librarians in North America and abroad.

The Slavic and East European Library was a holistic enterprise housing all of the Slavic catalogers, bibliographers, and support staff along with a comprehensive reference collection and a reading room and circulating collection of mainly language and literature texts. Marianna thrived in this atmosphere, serving at various times as director of the Slavic Reference Service, which she formally started in 1976 (still going strong after nearly fifty years), coordinator of the Summer Research Laboratory on Russia and Eastern Europe, which was the brainchild of Ralph Fisher and has served thousands of scholars since its beginning in 1973. Ultimately, she served as head of the Slavic Library from 1982 to 1989. After Ralph Fisher's retirement, she was director of the Russian and East European Center from 1987–89 and was elected president of AAASS (now ASEES) in 1995.

Marianna was a passionate promoter of the idea that academic librarians should be serious scholars and within the library fought to require that research and publication be a major factor in the tenure process. Among her numerous articles and books, her best known scholarly works are: *A Fence Around the Empire: Russian Censorship of Western Ideas Under the Tsars* (Duke, 1985) based on her 1979 dissertation, and *The Red Pencil: Artists, Scholars, and Censors in the USSR* (Kennan Institute, 1988) co-edited with Maurice Friedberg, her friend and mentor who was head of the Slavic department at Illinois and the author of many books about Soviet censorship.

She became founding director of the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs in 1991 and continued in that position until her retirement in 2002. From 1997 to 2000, she chaired the library program of the Soros Foundation and was active in founding the Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) within the International Federation of Library Associations and

Institutions (IFLA) in 2011. Marianna received the Pushkin Medal from the Russian government in 2000 for her contributions to Russian culture and education, and in 2001 she was the first recipient of the University of Illinois's Sheth Distinguished Faculty Award for International Achievement. In 2005, she received the Humphry/OCLC/Forest Press Award from the American Library Association. In 2011, she received the Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award from the UIUC School of Information Sciences as well as the Public Service Award and Alumni Medal from the University of Chicago Alumni Association.

Marianna described herself as becoming over the years "a sort of roving ambassador for the world community of Slavic scholars and librarians." Since her new responsibilities in the 1990s steered her gradually away from Slavic librarianship, current Slavic library specialists may not be aware of her importance to the field. Encomiums from her contemporaries on learning of her passing testify to "her many initiatives on behalf of an international community of scholarship," "internationally respected as a leading librarian and scholar in the field of Slavic studies," "an unforgettable character and a tireless promoter of Russian culture; a key figure in the field of Slavic librarianship," "the most 'alive' person I ever met, and the most remarkable," "such energy, such verve, such optimism. And such kindness and generosity."

The *Marianna Tax Choldin Papers, 1879–2017* are held at University of Illinois Archives in Urbana.

LAURENCE H. MILLER

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