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Interview: Dr. Julia Mickenberg

by

American Studies



In

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discussing her new book, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream*, Dr. Julia L. Mickenberg says “the main takeaway I want people to get is that people are complicated, institutions are complicated, and there are no easy solutions.” The book, which explores the history of American women living and working in Soviet Russia in the first few decades of the twentieth century, uncovers a little known phenomenon, remarking on the complicated stories of women who moved to Russia in search of opportunity and community. Dr. Mickenberg, an Associate Professor in the American Studies Department here at the University of Texas at Austin, teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on American cultural history, American radicalism, and women involved in radical movements.

Dr. Mickenberg published *Leaning from the Left: Children’s Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* in 2006, and it was in the course of working on this first book that she became interested in the stories of American women in the Soviet Union. Dr. Mickenberg was particularly intrigued by the stories of some of the individual women involved in this history: “The thing that kind of shifted me toward this was one of the women, Ruth Epperson Kennell, who is the focus of one of the chapters. She was one of the first people in the United States to write children’s



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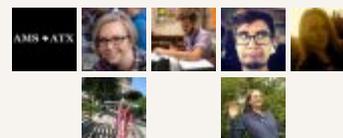
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books about Soviet Russia and looking at her papers—initially thinking I would write about her children’s books—I discovered a fascinating record of the years she spent living in a utopian colony in Siberia...I became completely obsessed with her.” The book investigates the reasoning behind decisions on the part of women like Kennell to move to Russia. Many were attracted by Soviet treatment of women, which included granting the right to vote immediately following the revolution in 1917, property rights, and abortion rights, as well as maternity benefits and state-supported childcare. While Dr. Mickenberg is careful to acknowledge the ways in which American women in Russia grappled (or failed to grapple) with the more difficult aspects of Soviet Russia’s history, including writing Pro-Russian propaganda, she is interested in depicting the people at the center of this history in all their multifaceted complexity.

One of the main issues with which

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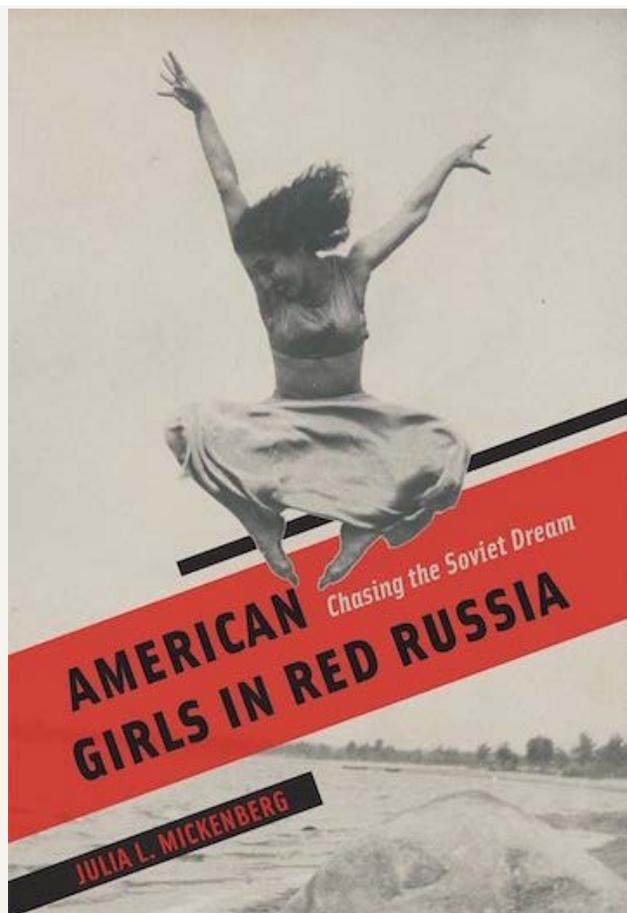


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American Girls in Red Russia engages is that of the “new woman.” Dr. Mickenberg was particularly interested in why American women wanted to move to Russia, a cultural phenomenon that has not been previously explored. Dr. Mickenberg writes, “The right to vote, which Russian women were granted not long before the February Revolution, continued under the Bolsheviks. But that was just the beginning.” Russian women were encouraged to view men as their equals, and, in addition to gains noted above, were granted access to education and professional advancement, and even equal pay for equal work. Some American women, chafing under restrictions to their independence in the United States, were eager to enjoy these benefits, and began heading to Soviet Russia soon after the

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Revolution in 1917. While many women would become disillusioned and attempt to move back West, Dr. Mickenberg complicates understandings of American involvement in the Soviet Union, remarking on the ways women were able to create meaning for themselves in a difficult historical moment.

American Girls in Red Russia also delves into the history of African American women in Soviet Russia, stories that have not previously been investigated at length. In a chapter entitled “*Black and White—and Yellow—in Red: Performing Race in Russia*,” Dr. Mickenberg includes the story of Louise Thompson Patterson, perhaps best known for co-founding the Harlem Suitcase Theater with Langston Hughes in 1938, as well as that of Frances E. Williams, a prominent African American actress. “I knew there were also a number of African Americans who went, and there has been writing about this movie that was never made called *Black and White*...I knew I had to look at it from a different angle from how other people had looked at it, so I started looking at it from the lens of performance, even though the movie was never made.” She highlights the stories of women involved in the attempted creation of this movie, and discusses the ways race and gender were intertwined in the experiences of African American women traveling to and living in Soviet Russia.

According to Dr. Mickenberg, one of the more complicated aspects of writing this

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history was in the research. She traveled to Russia twice in the course of writing the book, and describes researching in Russian archives as “an incredibly and almost unfathomably complicated process.” Dr. Mickenberg learned Russian in order to read the materials, although some were written in English, and she says that the whole research process ended up being very rewarding, adding, “I found some amazing things and it was just fascinating being in Russia...I was very grateful, several people saw me looking confused and helped me.” She never became exactly proficient in the language, but she got good enough that when she overheard one Russian archivist say to another, “her Russian is really bad,” she was able to respond (in Russian) “not that bad!”

When asked about further research growing out of this book, Dr. Mickenberg said she is working on a number of projects, including an edition of writings by Madeline Doty, a prominent American writer and activist who wrote about the Bolshevik Revolution..Dr. Mickenberg will be giving a talk on June 3rd, 2017 at the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians about the relationship between Ruth Epperson Kennell, who was one of the main inspirations for *American Girls and Red Russia*, and Theodore Dreiser, with whom Kennell worked for many years. She will also serve as the keynote speaker at the 18th Annual International Graduate Student Conference on Transatlantic History at the

University of North Texas in October, speaking about the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

Dr. Mickenberg hopes that *American Girls in Red Russia* works to enlighten its readers about the interesting and engaging stories of American women living and working in Soviet Russia, and the complexities of the women at the heart of the book. While these women were complicated, and made mistakes in the course of their lives and in the course of their relationships with the Soviet Union, she wants readers to understand the nuanced nature of these stories: “Instead of trying to paint people as black and white or good and bad, I wanted to show people in all their complexity.”

American Girls In Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream was recently named the *Times of Higher Education's* book of the week and Dr. Mickenberg has published an op-ed about her experience writing the book at *Not Even Past*, the blog of the history department at the University of Texas at Austin. The book has also been featured in *Life and Letters*, the magazine of UT's College of Liberal Arts, and has had excerpts of the book published at *Lapham's Quarterly* and *Timeline*.

Dr. Julia Mickenberg will read from *American Girls in Red Russia* on Tuesday, May 16th from 6-7:30 p.m. at Bookwoman, located at 5501 North Lamar Blvd, Suite A105, Austin, Texas 78751. For more information about the event, please visit <http://www.ebookwoman.com/event/book->

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