

Remembrance by Ilya Kukulin

Kukulin teaches at Stanford University. This appreciation was published (in Russian) on Facebook within hours of Elena Trubina's death. It was quickly translated into English by the Slavic scholar Megan Dixon, College of Idaho. The version here corrects a few minor errors of fact in Dr. Kukulin's text and copyedits Dr. Dixon's superb translation, based on personal knowledge of the subject.



I am sad to announce the death of Elena Germanovna Trubina, a person in many respects unique. It's customary to provide a professional classification: she was a philosopher, social anthropologist, researcher in urban studies, trauma studies, and human geography, and—through 2023—a professor at Ural Federal University in Yekaterinburg ... This description is accurate enough, yet inadequate, because even all this does not fully encompass Elena Germanovna—precisely because she essentially created her own professional classification: what interested her arose on the boundaries between various disciplines, like a previously undiscovered disciplinary direction of study.

Elena Germanovna was one of the few scholars from a Russian region who worked at the global level. E.G. traveled a great deal abroad—above all to the U.S.—yet she always returned to Yekaterinburg and published her most important books in Russia. I don't know what personal or political motives lay behind this choice, but for those who followed E.G. from afar, through her publications and presentations, this trajectory contained a lesson, not least a moral one: such a choice *is* possible, and making it again and again, year after year, *is* significant.

However, in mid 2022, E.G. made a different moral decision: she chose *not* to return to Russia ... In the months just prior to this, she had been working as a visiting professor in the Department of Global Studies and as a fellow in the Center for Slavic Studies at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. In fact, she and I met for the last time in Chapel Hill in 2024, when Masha organized a panel about the Russian cult of Pushkin at the annual conference of RASA; I also made a presentation there. E.G., to our mutual joy, came simply to hear us speak, and afterwards we had about ten minutes to chat together during a coffee break.

The word “Kulturreger,” as is known, comes from the German.* According to the rules of German, you could create the neologism “Geisteswissenschaftstragerin”—a bearer, mediator, and disseminator of humanistic studies; this would be yet another profession created by Trubina and an important part of her self-consciousness. She published in Russian, alone or with a co-author, books which exposed the Russophone audience to entire scholarly movements that had developed in the West but which in Russia were known only by hearsay or tangential sources. In collaboration with Sergei Ushakine, she collected the volume *Trauma. Points*, an exemplary collection of texts by major authors marking out various directions in trauma studies. She herself wrote the books *The narrated I: the problem of personal identity in contemporary philosophy* (1995), *The narrated I: the trace of the voice* (2002), *The city in theory* (2011) and others. To be precise, *The city in theory* is the best Russophone introduction to urban studies, with practically no equivalent. I can't even estimate to how many dozens of students I have recommended this book to for their term papers and theses. And Trubina was also the co-editor of the English-language anthologies *Russian Mass Media and Changing Values* (2010), *Dilemmas of Diversity after the Cold War: Analysis of 'Cultural Differences' by U.S.- and Russia-based Scholars* (2010), and *Cold Waters* (2022).

[* CCH: Possibly “Kulturträger,” based on the subsequent neologism. But perhaps a slangy variant.]

E.G. easily found a common language with fellow humanities scholars who were like her—there are always just a few—belonging to other disciplinary fields, but who, like her, were working at the leading edge of research and making a mark in their disciplines—for example, the historian-sociologist-anthropologist Oleg Leonidovich Leibovich from Perm and students of his school. For that reason it is not accidental that the photos here were taken by Leibovich. [photos not included]

And every time today when I have thought about life as it was lived by E.G.—about the way that she tried for as long as possible not to leave Russia completely—the question comes to mind: “And so, my son, did your Poles help you?”** Has anything at all changed in Russian society due to the activities of such people as E.G., if that society overall all the same has supported the war, and only quite recently have political experts begun to sorrowfully and uncertainly discuss whether anything has really shifted after four years of aggression against Ukraine? Or was all this [courageous dissent] just “sound and fury” as it says in *Macbeth*? Was all of it just in vain?

[** CCH: Gogol, *Taras Bulba*: In the context of the story this means, “Before I execute you, my own son, how do you feel now about consorting with the enemy you thought so highly of?”]

I continue to think that it *wasn't* in vain. And not only because Trubina's books will remain—though, if they have no readers, books unfortunately mean nothing. And not only because Trubina, as I would like to believe, all her life did what she felt she *ought* to do (and therefore what happened, happened).

I continue to believe that the universal humanistic and humanitarian tradition that E.G. taught raised, even if just a little, the level of resistance to fascism in the environment where she worked. Those people who studied the most important questions with her—that is, the methodological and ethical foundations of the disciplines she taught—now, probably, are silent in the political sense. But this does not mean that they agree with what is happening in Russia or that they will always stay silent.

Before that meeting in 2024, I saw E.G. in 2015 in the Latvian city of Kuldīga. There was a team working on the study of post-Soviet urbanism in the Baltic countries, including the essayist and historian of culture Kirill Kobrin, the leftist British architecture critic and blogger Owen Hatherley, and E.G. Masha and I love Kuldīga, and we took many walks with this group around Kuldīga and also Ventspils .where they went to examine Soviet and post-Soviet architecture.

In memory of Trubina I will post, in the first comment, a link to her essay “The old city with the widest waterfall in Europe: the times and scales of Kuldīga,” published in the journal *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* (*Untouchable Reserve*), about the results of her work in this research group. [Available in translation on this website] Unfortunately, the digital copy does not reproduce the photos which were in the paper copy of the journal, but you can see in this essay the striking multidimensionality of E.G.'s analytical gaze and her capacity to capture the most varied aspects of the life of human societies.