

Gaslit Nation
30 November 2022
“The Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon Interview”
<patreon link>

[intro - music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa (00:01):

Alight everyone. It's all hands on deck. We absolutely must win the Senate race in Georgia for Raphael Warnock for a long list of reasons. Number one, Reverend Warnock is a good human being and we need more people like him in the Senate to set the standard of the type of public officials we want. He's a decent, empathetic, wonderful person. Number two, a clean 51% majority in the Senate gives democracy, gives the Democrats the closest thing we have to people actually fighting for good governance at the moment. A stronger hand in negotiating with ruthless Mitch McConnell, ruthless Manchin and Sinema. The Dems don't have to power-share on this committee and it streamlines the whole process of pushing in these judges that we need to balance out the court-packing by McConnell and Trump, which saw 30% of our courts taken over by these ideologue Federalist Society judges.

Andrea Chalupa (01:00):

The third reason why we need Reverend Warnock to be elected—and this is extremely urgent—the Senate map for Democrats in 2024 is going to be extremely tough. That is why we need to bank as many Democratic senators as we can, now, this year. So we absolutely must get Reverend Warnock in there. And obviously the final reason is, who wants to deal with six years of Herschel Walker? So join us for these two extremely urgent all hands on deck phone banks for Georgia; Thursday, December 1st, 6:00 PM Eastern. That's Thursday, December 1st, 6:00 PM Eastern. And then the final one is Election Eve, Monday, December 5th, 5:00 PM Eastern. Monday, December 5th, 5:00 PM Eastern. You can RSVP for each of these events. Come join us, hang out on Zoom. At each one, we're going to select a volunteer to get a signed copy of Sarah's latest book, *They Knew* and a *Mr. Jones* film poster. Do not miss it. Again, all hands on deck for Reverend Warnock in Georgia. We must win this race. Thank you. See you soon.

[intro theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (02:24):

Hello everyone. Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your co-host, Andrea Chalupa, and it is a great honor that I'm finally having a conversation with the great Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon. She is a PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania School of Arts and Science with a focus on, of course, history. She is a Penn Presidential PhD fellow, a Perry World House graduate associate, a Cold War archives fellow. Her work examines how Black experience in the Soviet Union shaped Black identity and how the presence of people of color shaped ideas and understanding of race, ethnicity and nationality policy in the Soviet Union, East Germany and post Soviet space. Her public writing analyzes the linkages between race, foreign policy and culture in the United States, Russia and Ukraine. Her writing has appeared in *Foreign Policy*, *The Moscow Times* and the Kennan Institute's *Russia File*. She has also become a regular commentator on Ukraine and Russia in American and international media outlets such as AP, CNN, MSNBC, NBC, CBC and BBC. Kimberly, welcome to *Gaslit Nation*.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (03:32):

Thank you. It's an honor to be here.

Andrea Chalupa (03:34):

Well, I'm thrilled. Your background is so fascinating, what you're focused on. What drew you to Ukraine? What was that journey like for you?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (03:43):

So I've been interested in the Soviet Union since I was in elementary school. My parents let me watch a lot of History Channel, so [laughs], I was really into the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. It was just World War II all the time back then. So, this is before the aliens.

Andrea Chalupa (04:03):

[laughs] I was just gonna say-

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (04:05):

It's before the aliens, you know, it's somewhat historical.

Andrea Chalupa (04:09):

Yeah. Just for folks listening, basically the History Channel right now in the US is all about aliens. We don't understand why. It used to be about history, but go on.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (04:16):

So I've just been interested in it. But my freshman year of college was the first time I actually got to take a course on Russian and Soviet history and I just fell in love with it. But I never really got to study Ukraine and Ukrainian history until my first year of my master's degree. I was lucky I was at Harvard, who has an outstanding Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, but also—

Andrea Chalupa (04:37):

I was there! Sorry, go on [laughs].

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (04:40):

He's amazing and the first Ukrainian focus class I took was with Serhii Plokhii who was a Ukrainian scholar, and it just opened my eyes to how different Soviet history looks from the Ukrainian or an Uzbek or Kazakh perspective versus from the very centric perspective we have in traditional Soviet history. And so from there I started working on my master's thesis on the Holodomor—on the famine in Ukraine—in the Soviet period in the early '30s. And I went to Ukraine in 2013 to do archival research in Kyiv and Odesa. So it was a little bit before, it was a couple months before Euromaidan started. So that's kinda how I got into Ukraine was I had an amazing professor who's Ukrainian, who taught me Ukrainian history who really expanded my mind and my approach to my work.

Andrea Chalupa (05:30):

Serhii Plokhii is extraordinary. He wrote the must-read book *The Gates of Europe* which positions Ukraine in the larger European history. It's a must-read book. He's phenomenal. Obviously you focused on, let's

be real, a country that, you know, when you started researching was a largely misunderstood or ignored, overlooked country. And since then a lot has changed. What has that been like for you, this sort of surreal experience where you chose this focus and suddenly it's like the biggest story in the world and everyone wants to talk to you and work out with you?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (06:08):

[laughs] It has been weird because I remember watching Serhii in 2013-2014, you know, with the illegal annexation of Crimea and the Russian incursions into Luhansk and Donetsk. I remember watching him respond and I saw how, I mean, his family is from Ukraine. He is Ukrainian. And to see him and so many of the other Ukrainian scholars at HURI (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute) dealing with that. And so now it's interesting because, once again, everyone's paying attention to Ukraine. But now I have a voice, I have some expertise that I can share. But it's been interesting because I'm like, y'all could have paid attention to Ukraine in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, you know, anytime before because Ukrainians have been saying this was gonna happen. Not just Ukrainians; Georgians, Central Asians, a lot of people from the former Soviet Union have been saying and been worried about this type of Russian war and this type of Russian incursion upon sovereignty. But it has been good, I think, for the field and for the study of Ukraine. A lot more people are interested in Ukraine and a lot more people are interested in knowing about the Soviet Union and Russia as imperial powers. But also, to be fair, a lot of people are also interested in ignoring the fact that the Soviet Union and Russia were empires. And I just don't understand how you think a country can get 11 timezones big without imperialism, but maybe that's just me [laughs].

Andrea Chalupa (07:36):

Right, exactly right. And if anyone out there of any age, of any background is interested in the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, HURI, which Kimberly referenced, they have a summer program. They have all types of programs. They're based in Cambridge. They're on the Harvard campus. I spent time there, it changed my life completely. I loved it. It was my gateway of eventually moving to and living in Ukraine alone. And I can't recommend it enough for anyone who has the interest and/or flexibility with their schedule, definitely check out HURI, the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute. So, why do you think Americans or anyone in a safer—relatively safer—democratic country around the world, why should they care about Ukraine today?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (08:23):

I think one of the key reasons we should care about Ukraine is empathy for other humans. You should care about Ukraine. You should care about Syria. You should care about Lebanon. You should care about all these places. But if I'm thinking about it from a European perspective in terms of why should we care in the EU, why should we in the United States care? One: What Russia is doing in Ukraine is a genocide. It's cultural erasure. It's ethnic cleansing. But also, this is a replay of what Russia did in Chechnya in the two wars Russia fought against Chechnya in the '90s, what it was going to try to do in Georgia in 2008 and what it's done in Syria. So this has major international implications but also in terms of humanitarian crises. Each one of these Russian invasions has caused a humanitarian crisis and it always falls back onto the privileged countries of the world to help these people. And—we're seeing it now—Russia has continually used its energy as a bargaining chip but also to hold other countries hostage to its political aims. And we're seeing the devastation of that now with rising inflation but also, you know, a cold winter that's coming with an unsure energy supply. So even if you don't think what's happening in Ukraine matters to you in terms of ethics and empathy, it definitely will impact your wallet and it's gonna impact the heating of your home in the United States. But even more so in Germany and in France.

Andrea Chalupa (09:50):

Absolutely. Obviously there's a lot of pressure from various circles on Ukraine to negotiate, sit down with Russia and negotiate. And currently, as we speak, Russia's losing this war that they started

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon.

Mmhmm <affirmative>

Andrea Chalupa:

And Ukraine is making great strides in the battlefield. They just liberated a massive area, Kherson, the city of Kherson, which was the first area really seized by Russia. Now it's liberated. And we're watching all of these powerful liberation videos of people crying and kissing and hugging Ukrainian soldiers and throwing flowers at them. All the things that Russia, that Putin promised his soldiers would happen to them if they invaded Ukraine. What would you say to those who are saying, "Gosh, we want this war to be over. Why can't Ukraine just sit down and negotiate, give some land in exchange for peace?"

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (10:39):

I think it's really easy to say that when you aren't having to question if your children or your grandparents or your parents are still alive or if they've been murdered by Russian troops. So I try to keep that in my mind. But also, understand that you can't have negotiations with Russia unless you understand what Ukraine is facing. And what Ukraine is facing is a Russia that wants to partition Ukraine and has continually refused to acknowledge Ukrainian sovereignty, both cultural and political sovereignty. And so when you ask Ukraine to sit down with Russia and to negotiate, we need to be very clear with what that means. And what that means oftentimes is a mealy mouthed way of saying, "Ukraine, give Russia what it wants so this war can end and we can go back to being dependent on Russian oil and gas." That isn't what Ukraine wants.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (11:28):

And Ukraine has said multiple times, President Zelensky has said they will fight until the last Ukrainian because Ukrainians understand that this war is existential. It has always been existential. And so my question is, how do you negotiate with someone who's holding you hostage? That isn't a negotiation. Until we understand that then we need to stop throwing around the word "negotiation" because that's not what it is. It's a carving up of Ukraine. I mean, for this case, you actually actually need Ukraine in these negotiations and I think a lot of people in foreign policy spaces don't want Ukraine in these negotiations. They want Russia and America to sit down, or perhaps the EU, and to partition Ukraine into a way that appeases Russia but also allows them to kind of get away with this with some type of saving face. None of that requires or needs Ukraine and that's the problem.

Andrea Chalupa (12:14):

What do you think Russia wants right now? What are their aims in Ukraine? What are their aims, just generally, in the world? What are they going for?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (12:22):

Whew. Okay, so [laughs]—and this comes from my studying of Russia, my work on Ukraine and my knowledge of the Soviet Union Imperial Russia: Putin has very much been interested in ending this idea of a unipolar world and not necessarily unipolar under the influence of the United States, but unipolar

under the influence of the United States and the EU (the European Union). And what Putin has focused on doing for well over a decade now is to show the frailty of international institutions, particularly those uplifted by the West like the United Nations and the European Union, but also to show that Russia is still a world power that has to be considered in foreign policy. Some people say, "Oh Russia's just a gas station." That contributes to the problem. Russia's not just a gas station because also what does it say about Ukraine if Ukraine's being embattled by this country that people would just say "is a gas station".

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (13:19):

Russia is a country, right now, that is increasingly isolated, is increasingly turning itself toward Iran and North Korea and countries that fundamentally do not participate or respect democratic institutions. And what Russia is doing is showing that there is no longer a unipolar world, it is multipolar and it wants to lead another pole like it did when it was the Soviet Union. But to do that it needs to, in Putin's understanding, reclaim what was Soviet, what was Russia, which is Ukraine, particularly Eastern Ukraine. Of course, the problem is, it all hinges upon the Western reaction to Russian behavior. If the West had responded appropriately in 2014 when Russia illegally annexed Crimea, we wouldn't be in this position. But we are. When Russia can sit at United Nation Security Council meetings and human rights meetings, it's showing that it's making a mockery of these international institutions. And I think that's the point. I think that's the greater point. Ukraine is part of this puzzle, this piece, this magnum opus that Putin's working on. And it's not just to take over former pieces of the Soviet Union, it's to fundamentally destabilize these international legal institutions and Western institutions.

Andrea Chalupa (14:37):

Basically, avoid accountability and enrich themselves and just become sort of the top dogs on the global stage.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (14:46):

Yeah. Putin understands power, and not just rhetoric. It's realpolitik. It's military power and influence. And when we talk about the reset that happened in 2008 under President Obama, I mean, I feel like that was what was missing, was this understanding of how Putin operates and how he sees the world. It very much is zero sum in terms of who has influence and who wields power.

Andrea Chalupa (15:10):

What do you think the Obama administration and the global democratic alliance generally should have done in reaction to Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine that followed shortly after?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (15:24):

One of the key things is where were these sanctions in 2014? Because Russia's had eight years to fund this war of terror against Ukraine. But also, I think that when we talk about the agreements that were made, like the Minsk agreements, and trying to reinforce Minsk agreements between Russia and Ukraine, all those did was reinforce the illegitimate Russian claims to Ukrainian territory. And we saw this up to January where we were having negotiations with Russia and these Western powers were trying to talk about the Minsk agreements and, you know, reinforcing those and trying to appease Russia. And none of it worked because they fundamentally misunderstood what this was about. Putin isn't just going to risk ruining Russia's reputation but also ruining Russia's economic production solely to have Luhansk and Donetsk. That's not what he's after. What he has shown, I mean, and he played many Western leaders in January and early February where, you know, Macron is meeting with him and then two weeks

later he's invading Ukraine. And all of this is part of that show of force, but also to show the frailty of the west. And it's been working.

Andrea Chalupa (16:38):

Who does that work for? Who is he trolling the West... for whose benefit? Who's his audience?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (16:44):

For Russia is the key but also for Iran, for North Korea, for the Syrians who are supporting Russia, but also as we've seen online, for a lot of people in the West whose politics have somehow aligned them with Russia. And they help destabilize domestic policies and foreign policies in these Western countries against Russia. All of this benefits Putin but also it benefits this greater understanding for these powers who don't want a unipolar world. And I think Iran, North Korea and to some extent China—which is still supporting Russia—they're still pushing for that. So it's kind of like a renegotiation of the end of the Cold War. And I think that's kind of what we're seeing is the renegotiation of the Cold War back to this antagonistic bipolarity that we thought was over. And unfortunately, if you look at a lot of American history books, they do think it's over. And Putin's showing them it's not

Andrea Chalupa (17:40):

Wow. So if Putin goes away, let's say, because he's getting up there in years... Let's say Putin's gone tomorrow. He gets pushed down the stairs. What happens then? Is the war in Ukraine over? Does Russia cool off and we head towards another reset? What do you see after Putin coming out of Russia?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (18:03):

This is a difficult question. The way that Putin has operated the power vertical, how he's centralized power, if he does fall down a flight of stairs and dies tomorrow, the power vacuum that could open is a concern but I don't necessarily think the war in Ukraine ends. A lot of people see Putin as the embodiment of everything wrong with Russia and it's all his fault and that's not true. There are a lot of people in Russia who support the war, who supported the initial invasion and who have supported Putin for the past 20 years. They supported him when he invaded Georgia. They supported the Russian invasions of Chechnya in the '90s under Yeltsin. So those are some key things to understand. But also, in America and for a lot of Western countries who don't understand Russian domestic politics, they think that a person who is a liberal—meaning anti Putin—is somehow going to be good for Russia.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (18:55):

And that's not necessarily the case. A lot of these Russian liberal politicians have very problematic and racist views towards Russian ethnic minorities and also Russian residents who are from Central Asia and there is significant state and structural racism against these types of ethnic minorities, so just filling in the blank of Putin with a Russian liberal isn't necessarily going to solve the problem. What we have to think about is, if there is a reset with Russia, it can't just be a slap on the wrist. Russia needs to be held responsible, meaning not just Putin, but every single person in the Kremlin who contributed to this, every general. Putin is not in the field fighting and shooting civilians, right? These are Russian soldiers. All of them need to be held responsible and accountable for what they've done. But also—and this is key—you can't be dependent on Russian oil and gas anymore.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (19:51):

Russian oil and gas; the receipts from Western countries have funded this war. But also, we have to think about the region. For a long time, the United States have been focused on the war on terror and it's

primarily been focused on the Middle East. You can't just ignore the landmass of Eurasia anymore. You have to focus on things east of Germany. And I think this is what the war has shown; you have to build and strengthen the relationships not just with the Baltic countries but I think, you know, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, the Southern Caucasus, all of these regions of the former Soviet Union that were kind of left to flounder under Russian influence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. All of these need our help and they need our support or we're just gonna keep going back to this situation where Russia is using military means and economic means to dominate its former colonial holdings.

Andrea Chalupa (20:45):

And that leaves us all vulnerable, because here we are..

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (20:48):

Exactly.

Andrea Chalupa (20:50):

So we need to decolonize our understanding of Russia and Russian history and all those who have suffered from Russian imperial genocide. And by decolonizing our understanding, we have to shift towards allowing countries like the Baltic states and other eastern European countries to basically take leadership on the strategy of countering Russian aggression because they know very well how it operates and how insidious it is, whereas many countries in the west—namely France and Germany—have Pikachu face when it comes to like-

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon:

[laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

There was some guy high up in German intelligence that was totally caught off guard in Ukraine at the time when the genocidal war broke out. He had to get evacuated from the country. That just shows you how reliable of an ally Germany is when it comes to standing up to Russian aggression. They're just not-

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon:

Mmmhmm <affirmative>

Andrea Chalupa:

-for various reasons which we've covered on this show. But what we're really being called to do, the global powers, is to decolonize their own understanding of who gets to lead us now. It's the countries that know very well the threat because they themselves have suffered under it. And so what advice would you have for people to decolonize their understanding of Russia when it comes to Ukraine? You spoke about it earlier, the Soviet Union wasn't actually a union [laughs] for one thing.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (22:21):

I think for Western audiences in particular, you have to really think about and think through some of your preconceived notions about the region. I mean, I'll be watching a TV show and they're like, "Oh, he's in Russian Georgia." I'm like, this is made in 2012. What are we doing? And like, "Oh, he's from the Ukraine." These little things have cultural import. And so often in cultural and just popular media in the United States in particular, the former Soviet Union is flattened into Russia. Everything is Russia. Even in books. And I tweeted about this, I was like, "American historians, can you please stop calling the Soviet Union Russia when you mean the Soviet Union?" Because these kind of things, it leads to people being like, "Well I thought Ukraine was part of Russia." They don't make these connections.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (23:09):

But also I think in terms of education, one, we need to be better educated about countries east of Germany in general, even including Germany. A lot of Americans don't have very good knowledge about the region. A lot of Americans didn't know where Ukraine was until the invasion. And so they don't understand these concepts when you have people from the Baltics or from Ukraine or from Uzbekistan or from Georgia talking about the threat that Russia is. If you've never thought about these countries outside of the umbrella of Russia, then you don't understand the problem. But also, we have to think about our domestic politics in a global context. And I've seen it so often, people are like, "Oh, we have money we can spend on Ukraine but we can't fix the water in Flint, Michigan." It's like, actually we can and we should do both. And to understand that some of our domestic issues include global implications; the election in 2016 and Russian meddling. Russia has been doing this. And so all of this is connected. So I think we have to listen to people and scholars from the region but also in American academia we have to start engaging more with our colleagues who are from Ukraine and the Baltics and Central Asia, listening to them, working with them and not working above them, but that also requires us to reorient the field and to be okay with decentering Russia in our analysis. And that's gonna take a long time.

Andrea Chalupa (24:33):

Absolutely. And to your point, where people have to get familiar with countries east of Germany, that's how so many people on social media, when the genocidal war first broke out in February, so many well-meaning people on social media—especially on the left and especially on the far right—were passing around this viral video of JJ Mearsheimer, a so-called realist at the University of Chicago saying that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is NATO's fault because NATO expanded into Russia's neighborhood. But if people understood Eastern European history and the genocides that these Eastern European nations, these once captive nations of Russia, suffered under; the immense terror, the trauma, the Russification where their language and culture was suppressed and replaced with Russian. So if people understood that history, they would understand why these Eastern European nations were clamoring to join NATO. And so JJ Mearsheimer's viral clip that fooled so many people can only be true if Soviet history and therefore Soviet atrocities never happened.

Andrea Chalupa (25:52):

But they did. And that's what's been driving NATO expansion. These countries want to join NATO.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon:

Precisely.

Andrea Chalupa:

I would also like to point out JJ Mearsheimer just visited GOP darling Viktor Orbán, the dictator of Hungary who has destroyed democracy in Hungary, right? The opposition in Hungary just tried to unite and overcome Orbán, but they couldn't because of the extreme gerrymandering. After they fought all this political oppression, vindictive audits, all the pressure on journalists and opposition leaders, they couldn't even do it because it's an electoral autocracy now in Hungary. And that is why Tucker Carlson, the Fox News machine, Marjorie Taylor Greene Machine, they love Viktor Orbán because they wanna do that to the United States. They wanna do that to the so-called red states, places like Mississippi, Texas and so on. And Mearsheimer—Mearsheimer, the darling of the left and the far right who spreads disinformation against Ukraine—Mearsheimer is going to Hungary and hanging out with Orbán. And together, they're having their talks about Ukraine and spreading Kremlin talking points on how Ukraine has to negotiate and we've gotta end the war Ukraine. So I just want everyone to wake up to that.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (26:59):

Exactly. And I think on so many levels it's been so tiresome and just enraging to see people who know nothing about the Soviet Union or the former Soviet Union deciding what should be done. Mearsheimer is a political realist, he's a political scientist, but he is a generalist. He's not an expert on this region. And this idea that this war is somehow caused by NATO expansion, it's so tiresome. You're just repeating what Putin has said and he has said this. The same talking points most of the left and the right have been using against this war were the talking points Putin invented in 2014. None of it has actually changed. But the key question is, and it should be to any critically thinking person: Why do all these countries want to join NATO? Who are they afraid of? Ukraine?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (27:50):

And let's be real, if NATO was the problem, how would invading Ukraine and being a threat to Poland and Hungary, how does that in any way, shape or form make a country less likely to join NATO or less likely to want to join NATO? I will give Putin more credit than that, that he wouldn't do that to, you know, somehow dissuade NATO. What he's trying to do is show that NATO won't help you. That is the point. It's to destabilize NATO because he knows NATO will not be joined. Russia will not be able to join NATO. But it is enraging to see people who should know better, who have PhDs, perpetuating these clearly ahistorical myths about the causes of this war. And they are the reason why this has continued. They did this in 2014 and when you go, you know, shake hands and hang out with Viktor Orbán, who has closed Central European University and they've had to relocate to be in Austria, he's against free speech and free thought and sharing of ideas.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (28:52):

He's oppressing ethnic minorities. He's oppressing the LGBTQIA community. And I've written about this; the way that the far right in the United States—and many people don't seem to understand this—the far right in the United States is still part of an international system, except it's international white supremacy. They're influencing the far right in Russia, they're influencing the far right in Poland, they're influencing the far right Hungary and they talk to each other. They learn from each other. So what does it mean when you have American scholars engaging with people like Viktor Orbán and supporting Vladimir Putin? It's really terrifying because they're giving an academic seal of approval onto genocide.

Andrea Chalupa (29:30):

Absolutely. Absolutely. So on the topic of genocide, November marks the month of commemoration for the Holodomor, Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine. This November is a very special time, obviously, because of the current genocide in Ukraine, but also, it's kicking off what's about to be a year long commemoration of the 90th anniversary. So from this November to next November, it's the 90th

anniversary of Stalin's genocide of famine in Ukraine. So I wanna just ask you because this is your focus, one of the areas that you focus on in your work: Could you explain what is the Holodomor, what is the significance of it and what connections do you see with what's happening today?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (30:18):

So, the Holodomor, which means essentially death by starvation in Ukrainian, is a foundational part of modern Ukrainian history. And so this is happening in 1932-33 in the Soviet Union. So while you have the five year plan and you have Stalin's push to industrialize the Soviet Union, you also have him forcing the collectivization of agriculture. And so Ukraine was the breadbasket of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's economy was dependent on agricultural production in Ukraine. You have another problem from the Soviet point of view, the Stalinist point of view, that Ukraine, particularly Eastern Ukraine which is what we're talking about, in the '30s Western Ukraine was not part of the Soviet Union formally until after World War II. The peasantry. And that's what my master's thesis is on, is the reactions of the peasantry to collectivization. So the Ukrainian peasants, they're nationalists in terms of they speak Ukrainian, they celebrate being Ukrainian, but also they're vehemently anti-Bolshevik because of the collectivization of agriculture.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (31:21):

They do not want their land taken away. They do not want to be forced to join collective farms or state farms. They want to produce for themselves. And so what happens over the course of this year is the state aided famine. There was no reason for over 9 million people to starve to death in Ukraine and millions of people to starve to death in Kazakhstan. The state continually took grain, and when I say took grain, they had the grain in storage to be able to sell onto the market. They could have fed these people who produced all of this food, but they didn't. And so what I argue in my work is that the Holodomor is not just a state-made famine, but the purpose was to create Soviet subjects out of Ukrainian peasants. It was to break their will and to show them the high cost of disagreeing with Bolshevism, which was starvation.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (32:13):

And so it's important because throughout Soviet history, Ukrainians aren't really allowed to talk about what happened. They aren't allowed to process the Holodomor. And even until now, Russia has denied that it was a state-made famine. It has denied any responsibility, or Soviet responsibility, for the famine. So you kind of have this constant thread of victimization and oppression of Ukrainians and then the Russian denial that it happened. And, you know, it's gaslighting. It's perpetual gaslighting. And you see it also following World War II with the immense suffering of the Ukrainian Jewish community. Millions of Ukrainian Jews were killed by the Nazis. And then you can't talk about it because the Holocaust isn't really discussed in the Soviet Union. The idea was no Soviet Jews suffered more than any other Soviet person. It was the entire Soviet Union that felt World War II.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (33:08):

So you have this decades-long suppression of key points of Ukrainian history that become really important when Ukraine gets independence and Ukraine is finally able to investigate and talk about its particular national history. So this upcoming anniversary is really important because, once again, we see Ukraine being oppressed and, you know, genocided by the Russian state in Moscow. But this time, unlike when it wasn't really able to in the 1930s, now Ukraine's fighting back. And I think that's what's important. But also what's sad is when you look at where Ukraine is being hit the hardest by Russia's military and what's being destroyed, a lot of it is agriculture. So once again, Ukraine's position as a breadbasket, not just for the former Soviet Union but for Europe right now and for many countries in the

third world, it's being harmed again. So for a lot of people and for a lot of Ukrainians, I think this is just part of this history that they've been fighting to have acknowledged not just by Russia, but by the world.

Andrea Chalupa (34:16):

Yeah, absolutely. And we see the same so-called, you know, the term, useful idiots. That's what they were called during the Soviet period; people in the West that were Kremlin propagandists. They're either paid off or they're true believers. And so you see a lot of these useful idiots today; Tucker Carlson just going against reality by saying, "Oh, Ukraine's losing the war. It's gotta sit down and negotiate." Meanwhile, Russia is getting completely pushed out in major regions. The dynamics are still there. It's the Western corruption, right? All of the industries, like the Koch brothers political network funding some of these think tanks where you have people, you know, the sort of Cato Institute types, various think tanks now and Washington DC saying, "Oh, Ukraine's got to negotiate and give Russia something in exchange for peace," you know, trying to bring back the 1938 Munich agreement with Hitler where Chamberlain and another European officials gave Hitler regions of Czechoslovakia for what they thought would be peace in our time.

Andrea Chalupa (35:27):

And it certainly wasn't. And I think what people have to understand, I'll just make this point, is that Russia is a house of cards. The cards themselves are this faith, this religious extremism faith in Russian imperialism. It was like that during the time of the Tsar and it was like that during the Soviet period. And even though they gobbled up all of these nations during the Soviet period, it was always Russian supremacy. So that's what we're up against and that's a very big structure to untangle and confront, especially when Russians today of all ages are used to historical truths being—quite literally—violently suppressed. So I don't know what the way forward is even when Putin is gone because we're still gonna be dealing with... Putin is a product of this larger system. So I wanna ask you, what do you think connects our fascists with their fascists? What do you think the Tucker Carlsons and the Marjorie Taylor Greenes and others see in Russia? Why is this marriage coming together between fascists in America and fascists in Russia?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (36:38):

This is something I've been interested in. I know a couple of researchers are working on it, but it's just things I happen to notice, particularly like in 2020 with the George Floyd protests and the Black Lives Matter protests that were taking place in America and parts of Western Europe. And I was looking at the Russian response and what was interesting to me is how often the Russian response was using far-right language from America; making fun of Black people who had been murdered by the police, talking about looting saying, "Well, is this what Martin Luther King died for?" Just repeating the same talking points. And I think that we're the canary in the mind, right? But all the canaries have died. And people try to say, "Oh, don't use 'fascism'". Well, what else can you use to describe this? I mean, historically what we're seeing with Russia and what we're seeing with Russian behavior in Ukraine, when people talk about, "Oh, we shouldn't say 'appeasement'. The 1938 Munich pact is different." But is it really? When Germany had ideas about national belonging in the Sudetenland, that's why they wanted those parts of Czechoslovakia, this idea that there were Germans there that needed German protection.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (37:43):

How is any of this different from what Russia has said and what Russia has done in Ukraine? So I think we have to start being comfortable with the fact that the 1930s can repeat themselves and we have to face the fact that we may be living through 1938 and have to make some hard decisions.

Andrea Chalupa (38:00):

Ugh, God. Yeah, absolutely. And Russia's not gonna stop. They need war to satisfy the beast, you know what I mean? They have a ruling class right now that's cheering on the war.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon:

Mmhmm. <affirmative>

Andrea Chalupa:

So they need to feed the beast. If we don't stop 'em in Ukraine, they're going to keep going. I don't... you know what I mean? They're going to keep going. They're gonna do it to Poland, they're gonna do it to Estonia. If we let them do it to Ukraine, they're going to keep going.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (38:28):

And we have to recognize that, but also understand who else could... What other countries could be looking at Russia and taking notice as a role model? Taiwan. You know, we have to think about these types of things and they're terrifying questions to consider, but this is what this is. And we've been forced into this position. Either we're gonna step up or we're gonna have some very terrifying developments that aren't just going to affect the former Soviet Union. It's going to completely destabilize these ideas of democracy and international institutions. That's the point.

Andrea Chalupa (39:02):

Absolutely. Listening to you makes my heart sing because as a Ukrainian American growing up in America, it was gaslighting central. I would tell someone, "Oh, my family's from Ukraine." And they'd be like, "Oh, you're Russian?" And then I would try telling them about the Holodomor and they'd look at me like I had three heads. as though I was making it up. It sounded so extreme it couldn't be real. And so it's just so nice to see Ukraine's history finally being decolonized and how so many experts out there are finally getting recognition for their work. So I'm so grateful that you are out there and I know you're dealing with a lot of annoying heat being a woman on social media, a woman with insights and expertise, a Black woman on top of that. I know you get it from all directions and you put yourself out there for the greater good to share these facts and to shine a light on this often misunderstood part of the world.

Andrea Chalupa (39:57):

I'm just so grateful for you and I and the work you do is so important. I could talk to you all day is what I'm saying. [laughs]. This could be like a series. We could have you on again, but I do wanna touch on this just in the time we have left. In your work, you focus on the Black experience in the Soviet Union. People are surprised to learn that there's an African diaspora in countries like Ukraine. What is the history there and what are stories of the black experience in the Soviet Union that most inspire your work?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (40:26):

I'm so glad you said that because people really do look at me and they're like, "There are no Black people in Ukraine. There are Black people in Russia." I'm like, "Let me tell the Black people I know in Ukraine and Russia that they don't exist. I'm sure they'll be interested to know this." [laughs]. But in my work, I'm really interested in the question of just because the Soviet Union and East Germany, for example, they say they're anti-racist, but what does that mean for Black people who are in the Soviet Union and East

Germany? And so what I found is, one, there's racism. There's anti-Black racism. But also the ways in which this idea of anti-racism being more important than actually practicing anti-racism. So for example, you have Soviet officials, when African students were protesting in the 1960s because they're being harassed and they're experiencing racism.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (41:15):

You have so many officials telling African students from decolonized Africa that they don't understand racism, that they're too sensitive. So you have those situations and I'm interested in how we get from the 1920s and '30s in which Moscow at night was a safe place for Black people, African Americans and Africans to be, to where we have now—and I mean, especially in the '90s—where there's just an incredible amount of violence against Black people. That means African Americans, Africans, Afro Russians, Afro Ukrainians. So I'm interested in this question. But what's been inspiring to me is how many African Americans in particular went to the Soviet Union in the '30s and they were able to escape Jim Crow. And particularly when they went to Soviet Central Asia, Uzbekistan in particular, when they were around Uzbeks and they weren't around Russian handlers, they saw what could be possible.

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (42:09):

They saw what could be possible if racial equality could be achieved. And so I think that hope is what I'm really drawn to and I keep going back to it because, I mean, studying racism is very difficult. It's even more difficult when people refuse to believe that the diaspora—the African diaspora—is that big, that it can be in Eastern Europe, where people say, “Of course they're racist over there, you're in Eastern Europe.” So I try to work on these issues to show race functions differently in Eastern Europe, particularly in the former Soviet Union because of understanding of nationality and ethnicity, but also that the diasporas everywhere and the diaspora's experiences are very different, and just how isolating it can be if you're Afro Russian or Afro Ukrainian and you were raced in a Slavic family and you're the only Black person around you your entire life growing up. What I hope to do is to shed light on these very real people, but also to kind of counter some of these really uncomplicated narratives about race in the Soviet Union, East Germany, where you can have an ideology that says you're anti-racist and you can love and support African American civil rights movements, but at the same time you're gaslighting Africans who are talking about racism, you know, happening within your borders. So these are like the puzzles I like working on that all came from me being a Black woman doing research in Ukraine and meeting an Afro Ukrainian woman. That's where it all started.

Andrea Chalupa (43:38):

Wow. Is there anything that, as we're heading into these critical winter months where Ukraine as we speak is very clearly decisively winning the war? It's not easy. The country's paying a toll. Russia very deliberately relies on a war crime strategy, as it did in Syria and Chechnya and Georgia, and it's a genocide. But these are critical months because there are rumbles in western media of like enough already, you know?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon:

Mmhmm <affirmative>

Andrea Chalupa:

Ukraine fatigue. The price of energy is going up this winter because the idiots in the West and the EU couldn't make a connection between Russia's war crimes and human rights atrocities at home with their

own business interests. They made sure that they're dependent on Russia for energy instead of seeing those as red flags. So what do you want folks to pay attention to? What should we be sensitive to in the months ahead?

Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon (44:36):

Some of the key.... And this is what's been worrying me, I've been thinking a lot about the winter. One is that the people of Ukraine are the victims of Russian aggression and Russian terror. And we have to hold that in the center of this and never forget that. Despite your discomfort at paying more for gas, it is much better than finding out your entire family's been killed. So I think that's important. Two, Russia thrives on Western... not necessarily Western ignorance, but Western discomfort and Western exhaustion. This is what happened in 2014. We got tired of hearing about Crimea, we got tired of hearing about Luhansk and Donetsk. You forced the Minsk agreements to be signed and you kowtow to what Russia wants. So the winter's gonna be incredibly important for continued Western support militarily and financially for Ukraine, but also for Western eyes to be on Ukraine because what happens is when Western media leaves is when we start seeing more and more atrocities. And if Russia is committing these types of atrocities with Western media on it, what will happen when the western media people leave Ukraine? That's what keeps me up at night.

[outro - theme music, roll credits]

Andrea Chalupa:

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Andrea Chalupa:

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