

**Disability History Association Podcast**  
**Guest Host: Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon**  
**Interview with Dr. Maria Bucur, Dr. Frances Bernstein, Dr. Maria Cristina Galmarini, and Dr. Magdalena Zdrodowska**  
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**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Hello and welcome to episode 40 of the Disability History Association podcast. My name is Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon and I will be your guest host for this episode. I'm an MA student at the Centre for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at the University of Toronto, where I research gender and disability in the Balkans at the turn of the century. Through my own research, I've noticed that historians of disability don't often engage with Eastern Europe and that likewise historians of Eastern Europe don't often engage with disability. To breach the gap, this episode we will discuss the historiography, current trends, and major topics in the history of disability in Eastern Europe. Throughout the episode, you'll hear from four scholars who are currently working in the field: Maria Bucur, Frances Bernstein, Maria Cristina Galmarini, and Magdalena Zdrodowska. Before we dive into the history of disability in Eastern Europe, we first need to explain what we mean by Eastern Europe. I use the term broadly to include the countries of the former Soviet Union as well as those in East, Central, and southeastern Europe. So, this region includes countries like the Czech Republic, Russia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Slovakia, Serbia—anything in that area. This region has a very different history from Western Europe.

In the 19th century, it was split between three competing empires: the Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires, which left a profound impact on the region. In the 20th century, many of the countries in Eastern Europe experienced some form of state socialism under the influence of the Soviet Union. With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR in the 1990s, this region underwent profound social, economic, and political changes. All of this means that the history of disability in Eastern Europe is likely to be significantly different from the history of disability in Western Europe or North America. To help us get a sense of disability history in the context of Eastern Europe, I decided to reach out to scholars who are currently working in the field. I was lucky enough to get to interview four of them, and as is the tradition with the DHA podcast, I started each interview by asking the scholars what brought them to disability history. My first guest was Maria Bucur, who is Professor of Gender Studies and History at Indiana University in the United States of America. She has written extensively about the experiences of disabled people in interwar Romania. Here's how she first got involved with disability history.

**Maria Bucur:** I'm a late comer to disability history. I've been involved in historical research since the 1990s and I only became really interested in it in the last, I would say, five years or so. I come from Bucharest, so I lived there between 1968 and 1985, and I wasn't really interested in history. I'm a violinist. I was interested in music. I'm still interested in music. It's very interesting. But when we left, my dad defected. In the 80s, things were really bad under Ceausescu. He saw an opportunity to get out of the country, and he was able to get a visa for the rest of us. So, lo and behold, back then, you could apply for a visa with the American government. If you were lucky or privileged—I think privilege has a lot to do with it, being educated and white, definitely big privileges—you were able to come to this country. Initially, I grew up with historical research and analysis being something that was really not very interesting. It was very much within the mold of top-down Marxist analysis

without much discussion of human agency and women missing entirely from the picture. Nothing shocking about that one. We're talking 1985. Right? I slowly got interested in how nationalism functioned because of ways in which I recognized nationalism as being part of my own perspective that I was not thinking about critically enough.

Then the revolution happened, and I happened to be in Romania in 1989 during the events and all that kind of gave me a sense of the power of history and the power of average people. The story in Romania is so dramatic in terms of how the government was toppled and what street protests ended up generating. So, I decided that I wanted to go to grad school for history. Boom, just like that. Then because the moment when I went to grad school—I started in 1991—was just about the time that, on the one hand, gender analysis was becoming like a really important framework for doing historical research. Joan Scott's famous article had come out in 1986, but we were studying it at the time. Looking into it and realizing, oh my God, there's nothing about feminism in Eastern Europe. On top of that, Keith Hitchens, who was my beloved advisor, gave me the run of his library. I was doing little notes for him, summaries of what he had in his collection because he had tens of thousands of books and primary sources. I discovered this bulletin for eugenics and biopolitics and it was like, oh, who knew? This was a big thing, you know?

So from that, I kind of I initially wanted to do a dissertation on feminism in the interwar period. The sources are really hard to find, to be honest. Even now, they're like all over the place and kind of hard to parse together. Although, important work and really incredibly good research has been done by a number of younger scholars. But eugenics was right up there, and gender was all over it. I was really interested in it. That's how I came to it. That's why this connection with Romania, because Keith Hitchens had worked in Romania and a lot of his materials were from Romania. So, it ended up being something that was really perfect. I was interested in obviously understanding my own country's past, and I've never been somebody who wants to do history just for the sake of history. I'm really interested in making it relevant for people that live in a place on the ground. To me, it makes more sense to try to do advocacy for a place where you have experience and where you can speak to the community that you want to support, not just as an ally but as a member of that community. That's kind of how I got to that.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** My second guest was Francis Bernstein, who's an associate professor of history at Drew University in New Jersey in the USA. She's written about people with physical and sensory disabilities in the Soviet Union in the mid 20th century. Here's her journey to becoming a disability historian.

**Francis Bernstein:** So how I came to Disability Studies. That story starts in high school. When I was in high school, I had the great fortune of taking a class in Russian literature and decided that I was going to be a comparative literature major in college and was going to start learning Russian in college. I started doing that. I finished fluent with Spanish, so as a sophomore, I enrolled in an intensive Russian language course, and the second I started in the course, I knew that this is this was going to be my field. I just fell in love with the language. I mean, people who study the Russian language either they love it, or they hate it. You don't see anybody really wishy washy about being committed to studying the language. I loved it. I had an unbelievably dynamic teacher, which I think made a big difference as well. So, I started studying Russian as a sophomore at college and immediately dropped all plans of being a comparative literature major. I wanted to be a Russian studies major, which I was. I was also very involved politically and academically in gender and in feminist issues. By the time I was a senior, I did a lot of both and decided, as a senior, to write an honors thesis on the underground feminist movement in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, which did become the subject of my senior honors thesis.

That got me thinking. When I was working on that I already decided I was going to get a PhD. I wasn't sure if it was going to be in history or not. I knew that I wanted to professionally study Russian women and sexuality and that was what I was going to be doing. While I was doing the reading for my senior thesis, I started reading all of the other underground publications that were coming out at the same time in the Soviet Union—the burgeoning human rights movement in the Soviet Union. In addition, and one of the most important publications, was the *Chronicle of Current Events*, which covered all dissident groups. One of the groups that it covered was this brand-new developing disability rights movements. So, I started reading stuff about that and decided, at that point, that that would be my second book. I wasn't quite sure what the first one would be. It was something about women and gender, but disabled veterans at the end of World War II was going to be my second book.

That's always been the plan. Always. Then, I put it on the back burner for the next 20 years or however long it took me to get a PhD. I got to the shape of my dissertation project knowing that I wanted to write about prostitutes. That was my master's thesis at Columbia. And of course, as you know, prostitutes mostly don't leave sources. They're busy. So, the only way to get at the issue was to look at the people charged with regulating them and taking care of them. Those were the doctors. That's how I became a historian of medicine. It was through the back door into studying sexuality. Then, as I discovered, the doctors were the ones who designed the revolutionary sexuality that was going to go along with the Russian Revolution. They were the ones who took control of the discipline of this area. So that was the basis for my book. At the time, when that was already in press and being edited and all that stuff, I started to think about my second project and that was going to be a project on disabled war veterans.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** My next guest was Maria Cristina Galmarini, who's an associate professor of history and global studies at William and Mary University in Virginia, USA. She also works on disability history in the Soviet Union with a particular emphasis on blind activism.

**Maria Cristina Galmarini:** My first book was about social rights for marginalized populations during Stalinism—so, in the post-revolutionary and Stalinist period of Soviet history. I didn't get into that project with a specific interest in disability history, but as I was trying to find entry points into the question of who has the right to receive the help of the state, the care of the state—as Soviet rhetoric would claim, the Soviet state cares for everybody and social rights were a major achievement of the revolution, according to this rhetoric—I needed to understand how non-model citizens understood their rights, and if the rights were actually granted to them according to the Constitution, according to the propaganda, and the rhetoric. I looked for marginalized groups. That was what I had in mind. I identified so-called defective children and marginalized population, children that—using a Russian term of the time—deviate from the norm. I discovered that single mothers were also a deviation from gender norms. Then, I discovered that there were two societies, one called the All-Russian Society of the Deaf and the other the All-Russian Society of the Blind. These groups also were deviating citizens according to Soviet norms. I became very interested in issues of disability from the perspective of so-called abnormality, so-called deviation from a standard, from a model of subjectivity or citizenship. That's how I got interested in it.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** My last guest was Magdalena Zdrodowska, who's an assistant professor at the Institute of Audiovisual Arts at Jagiellonian University in Krakow,

Poland. Her research focuses on the intertwined history of deafness, deaf culture, and technology.

**Magdalena Zdrodowska:** From my first training, I'm an anthropologist, and my second degree is in media and film studies. I was writing my PhD dissertation on television programs for and by minorities in Poland. I was doing field research with Byelorussians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians living in Poland today. But, at that time, it was more than ten years ago, they had their own television programs. They were preparing their own television programs for their communities. So, on one hand, I was doing anthropological research with them, and at the same time, media studies and research. I was combining these. When I graduated, I was looking for some new topics. I had just met another PhD colleague. He is a deaf person, and we were just supporting each other in this difficult path of PhD students—it was like a support group. We became friends and he told me a lot about Deaf culture, with a capital "D," and I was not aware of that before. He told me that he identifies himself as a member of an ethnic minority. For me, who was doing research on ethnic minorities, it was quite surprising and intriguing. That was my entry point to deaf culture, or rather, to research on deaf community in Poland. And I got a job at the Institute of Audiovisual Arts. So, I was continuing with my professional path with media studies.

I came up with the idea of investigating how deaf communities and deaf individuals use social media and were entering the Polish media sphere with a huge success. Facebook was translated into Polish back at that time, so it was really gaining momentum. The deaf communities were using forums before social media, but they were entering social media as well. At the same time, they were networking and self-organizing protests against the Polish Association of the Deaf, and they were using social media very extensively. It was a really amazing time for me as a researcher to try to grasp both of those topics: Deaf culture, this very powerful based on opposition, on protest, deaf culture, and the social media that they were using so extensively. Basically, I was interested in how deaf people used social media or the Internet in general in Poland, but very soon I realized that it is a very limiting topic and the more I was diving into this topic of how excluded groups use media, I started to widen my topic and my main research for the last ten years was on deafness, disability, and technology in general. I have published a book two years ago on deafness and technology. So, it was a long way, but basically through ethnic minorities, through deaf culture, I got to disability in a more general sense.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Later on in the episode, we'll get to hear about the projects that these scholars have been working on, but I want to start by sharing their impressions of how the field of disability history in Eastern Europe has changed over the last several decades and where it is now. Here's Professor Gelman's description of how the field has evolved since the early 1990s.

**Maria Cristina Galmarini:** So, in the 90s, right after the ADA was issued, there was the social model of disability that really was gaining momentum across the world. We also have the fall of communism, and suddenly a model that in the past had inspired many was completely delegitimized and dismissed. The history of that model was erased both by domestic actors and by foreign actors as well.

Of course, on one end there was the opening of the archives. However, in the 1990s, when the archives suddenly opened and there was accessibility of travel, the questions related to disability history were not really at the center of scholarly attention. What scholars were looking at was questions of political history and social history. There were all sorts of interesting turns in the historiography of the region, but disability was somehow a late comer. That's something that I think should be considered. Then there was the

delegitimization of what was accessible. So once scholars went into the archives and started noticing there was no Russian organization of the blind, the assumption there was, well, this was a state organization controlled by the Ministry of Social Welfare. Of course, those were apparatchiks. Those were state officers. If we want to recover the voices of people with disabilities, this is not where we should look. Now, I'm not saying this is wrong. Of course, the story I tell is not the story of ordinary blind people in the socialist world. I tell a story of leaders who were very much rubbing shoulders with high political authorities, who were trusted enough to be sent abroad, who were loyal. It is true that to discover and to hear the voices of ordinary citizen, looking at the archive of the Russian Society of the Blind is probably not the best place. We should look somewhere else.

But the assumption there again, and this is something I've been writing against in this last book I wrote, is that we dismiss a type of activism that doesn't make sense when looked at from the point of view of let's say post 1990, United States. It was a medical approach to disability. It was an approach that reformed, changed, trained, fixed, corrected, the disabled—whatever term we want to use there. This would be an anachronistic approach, I say. It's important to look critically at this history instead of dismissing it because the requirements of human rights, the requirements of the NGOs of the 1990s onwards are very different from what was the type of advocacy that was practiced, the only type of advocacy that could exist, in socialism. It has definitely changed. When I did my PhD from 2006 to 2012, I never encountered a course on disability history, despite the fact that my university, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, had and has a very strong history department and history program. There were courses on history of gender and sexuality. There were courses on all sorts of social history topics, but I never saw in the catalogue a history of disability course, for instance. So, that was the time when history of disability was slowly taking shape.

Scholars of the region were also starting to look at disability. One fundamental book here is Claire Shaw's book, *Death in the USSR*, which came out in 2017, if I'm not mistaken. That has really opened the eyes of many scholars to how crucial it is to look at the history of subjectivity in the Soviet Union or issues of identity in the Soviet Union from the perspective of disability. Even before that book, there were books that were on issues of social rights, welfare, gender, that looked at so-called invalids, but they were not asking disability history questions. There were books about defectology as a science or the education of children, but the disability studies or disability history angle was not prominent. It was not the frame—it was not the theoretical or analytical frame. So, that was a really pioneering, pathbreaking book. Then, slowly more and more scholars and PhD students started to be interested in deaf and blind people, in defectology, in issues that are, if not closely related to disability itself, are closely related. Aging, for instance. Aging and disability are important to be considered together, for instance. These fields have slowly started to emerge, and right now I would say they are really blooming.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** This brings me to the next question I asked my guests about how they describe the current state of the field and where they thought it was going. Here's Professor Bucur's answer.

**Maria Bucur:** I've been reading avidly what people are writing, and there's clearly a kind of a flourishing of publications on this. I decided a couple of years ago after I finished my book on the veterans to try to do more exploration and maybe generate a small network of folks to kind of read together each other's work, the work that's been published, and all that stuff. So, my colleagues, just because that's who responded, are folks who work on the 20th century. My sense is that first, 20th century is where most of the work is right now. There are, in fact, some folks who are doing work in, you know, pre-World War I, South

Slavs, Poland, even Romania actually, Imperial Russia. I have a capacious understanding of Eastern Europe. I'm all good with including Russia in these considerations. So, that that was pretty clear when I was kind of looking around. Most recently, I got enough funding to organize a conference in Berlin. Indiana University has a gateway facility in Berlin. A colleague of mine, Sarah Phillips, who has been doing work on disability studies in Ukraine, especially in the early post-communist periods for the 90s and aughts. She had already organized a conference there and told me that the facilities were really good, and they were able to accommodate people with disabilities. So, I thought, okay, let's try this. I put out a call for papers that I didn't make a lot of effort, I'll be honest too. I was really busy, and I got 38 responses back. I was hoping for ten.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Wow—that's a lot more.

**Maria Bucur:** Yeah, it's wonderful. I mean, my sense of it, and I was talking to the members of the small network that I've got going, was that we happen to be standing at the right place at the right time. The people who apply, the majority of them, are from what I would call post-communist countries. It's primarily a lot of Poles, a lot of Romanians, some Czechs, some Bulgarians, people working on the DDR, Ukraine, Russia, Central Asia, a couple of folks doing that. So, clearly, we had a moment of synergy here. It is still primarily 20th century and primarily folks focusing on the communist period. First of all, there's more data. I mean, I think that's a lot of it. If you have that interest, you're more likely to find documentation that can speak about the agency of people with disability because that's one of the big challenges, right? Like who's speaking for whom? In the interwar period in Eastern Europe, because of the high level of illiteracy—I mean, that's one of the problems I've had in my own career. Who is out there writing the book on veterans? I was just lucky because some of these folks were literate or somebody else was writing from this high level of illiteracy. So, you can see the Xs at the end, right?

Again, kind of hard to pin it to what every person is doing, and organizations are not very good about keeping records. During the communist period you have better records, plus state efforts to organize education, employment legislation, so you have a lot more to work with. Of course, there's the fascinating question that is being explored, and I think that's one of the big trends, is if you look at the kind of welfare and medical models that disability history talks about for the 20th century, where does this communist bloc—if you will, I'm just going to call it that for lack of better word—fit? We had a very interesting conversation of a book was just launched by a couple of colleagues from Sweden. One of them is actually from Romania and works on Romania and disability policies there: Radu Geraldinho. We were having a conversation about this book that he and his colleague just published—the book focuses on comparative looks at different systems in Europe. They kept using this welfare versus medical, and I pushed them a little bit because I feel like the kind of view of the citizen that communist states had, the notion of what is a right and obligation, it is connected to work and productivism in a way that is understood very much in connection to Marxist principles about the common good, and what sort of workers have to be put into society for the benefit of everybody through the state, and then what obligations the state has towards citizens.

It is to me, a unique way of thinking about productivism, though there certainly are parallels with how capitalism operates, but there is an inherent critique of capitalism in the productivist ideas about labor under state communism. That strikes me as a difference. So, I hope that our conference in Berlin digs through these questions of whether there is a third kind of framework to think about disability history in the 20th century, specifically the political framework of how individual capacity and therefore the relationship with the individual and the state, in terms of rights and responsibilities, is framed in these regimes

that I think are different because of the high level of state involvement in dictating both education and also productivity. Productivity is not about making something that's marketable. Productivity is about working eight hours a day as a worker to produce something, and what you produce, its value, is the labor itself and not the commercial value of it as in capitalism.

I see this as being very different. Maybe I'm just in my Cold War mentality and I can't get out of it, but I do think that there's a reality to that significant difference. For the interwar period, I think there's some other comparative things that are worthwhile considering. I go back to my veterans stuff. Honestly, even in the case of Romania, I just scratched the surface of what's going on there, because to really understand the impact of these types of policies, you want to go from locale to locale and try to see what materials you can collect there to bring to the surface: the activities of disabled veterans and their families in terms of how this impacted them. That, I think, is something that other people are doing. There are people working on Bulgaria, there's people working on Poland, and on Yugoslavia that I'm aware of—definitely, Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia is a case study that's been much better articulated than others. You have somebody like Victoria Schmidt. Her work is really powerful because it also implicates disability with race and racism and gender, and that's exactly the direction that I like to see more people take.

How those things come together and how then you understand—like Czechoslovakia, they celebrated not being like the others in Eastern Europe because they have a lot more of a democratic kind of understanding of citizenship and difference is not understood as deviance, but rather there's a crafting... Until you hit the Roma example, then it's like wow, okay. Well, that was not the Nazis and that was not the communists. Actually, some of that was going on before. Eugenics, again, seems to be very much connected to how normal citizens are understood and incorporated. So, I think that kind of work is very interesting because it starts to give us pause as to what was happening in the interwar period with regard to experiments with democracy, first of all. Really just starting to peel some of the onion there. Also, back to veterans, the extent to which the kind of discourse about veterans with disabilities that was happening in places that have more of a policy—I'm thinking the United States, Germany, and France as the main places where the technology and the discourses about, in this sense, physical disability—end up being very impactful.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Professor Zdrodowska emphasized that the increase in contacts between historians of disability in Eastern Europe was a major new development in the field.

**Magdalena Zdrodowska:** I have an impression that we are in a very powerful phase of networking in disability studies in Eastern Europe, and when I talk to my colleagues from Poland, but also from other countries in the region, we very often share the very same experience of having the feeling that we are the only ones doing disability research in our countries. That is a big work for us to do to find other colleagues or other researchers who do disability research, cultural disability research, disability history in Poland, in Czech Republic, in Bulgaria. I think it is the same in the whole region. It is definitely true for Poland. I was meeting other scholars doing research in disability studies during conferences abroad. That was basically how I was doing the networking because there were not so many platforms in Poland to even know that there are other researchers, not to mention the research that they do. So, I think the first thing that that we need to do is networking and building platforms to exchange our experiences and our knowledge. It was also my experience of attending foreign conferences, conferences abroad outside Poland, that I was meeting other scholars, disability studies scholars from the region, and when we were discussing our research and what is going on in our countries, we realized that what we

what we were taking as something very unique to Poland, to Czech Republic, to Bulgaria, in relation to the United States, is not that unique. It is very Eastern European thing.

For example, I think it was in Leiden that I was presenting about disability protests in Poland that was basically run by the mothers, which was very viciously used in public discourse as this figure of the greedy mother that is putting up her poor child to get some money. This image and the very fact that they were the mothers that were fighting for disability rights, I thought was something unique to Poland, but at the very same time, as my colleague from Bulgaria told me, there were protests of the mothers of people with disabilities there as well. So, it really showed me that we need more space for discussion and exchange and relating our research not only to the Anglo-Saxon academic sphere, which is the easiest because of the access of books, of theories, and of concepts, but we need to relate to each other as well because there are very many similarities.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Professor Bernstein explained how she, as a Russianist, also recently noticed the many connections and commonalities between different countries in the region.

**Francis Bernstein:** I was somebody who for a very long time would look east in my work, I was not really looking to Eastern Europe. I was looking to the large Soviet experience and the borders on the Far East, but one of the wonderful things about getting involved with this disability group is that so many of them work in Eastern Europe. So, I'm coming to learn about that experience later than others, probably because that was that was never my frame of reference. I'm really struck by how very similar they are. Well, two things. The Soviet grasp was strong, but also coming to this as a historian of medicine, which is what I am first—to look at the way that the roots of medicine in from the 19th century and earlier impact on the development of the medicalization of disability is something that is very common. It's kind of interesting to see the way that plays out both in these using these different axes, both history of medicine and then the Soviet bloc, and the way that the production of medical knowledge was shaped by both of them. It's different from Western Europe. Absolutely. But as I find there's really a lot of very—surprising to me—overlap between the experience of countries who were much closer to the West than what I'm used to.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** My guest also mentioned some of the region's specific challenges that historians of disability face when studying Eastern Europe. Professor Zdrodowska explained how there were much fewer sources from disabled communities themselves in Poland as compared with the United States.

**Magdalena Zdrodowska:** It is so pleasant, peaceful, and easy to do research on deafness and disability in in the United States because the archives are full. The scholarship is so rich, and you just dive into these concepts and theories. It is much, much easier to basically do research than to do it in Poland because of the scarcity of the sources.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** For Professor Bernstein, the challenge isn't so much the number of sources, but rather how they're organized within the Russian archives.

**Francis Bernstein:** Part of the reason that this book has taken a really long time to get done is that my research has been done in two-week periods. If you've ever worked in the archives in Russia, it's not like working in the archives in the United States where everything is digitized and you can get access to stuff really easily. So, it's taken a lot of two-week trips to get all of the matter and all of the documents that I needed to get this book done.



**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Professor Zdrodowska also identified several challenges that scholars from Eastern Europe face in the publication and dissemination stage of their research.

**Magdalena Zdrodowska:** We need to do it in English. That's the other thing. We read our research in English in journals that are published in the United States or in UK. So, it is this quite tricky situation, how to build this network effectively.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Meanwhile, Professor Galmarini emphasized that the war in Ukraine has had a profound impact on how historians of disability in Eastern Europe are doing research.

**Maria Cristina Galmarini:** As the war has been going on for one year at this point, no scholars are going to Russia. There is no exchange. There is an isolation that is almost Stalinist in many respects, although there is no official prohibition to the entry of foreigners into Russia. De facto. The fact that there is no exchange right now and there is a war going on might slow down the presence of scholars who self-identify as disabled in the field, or they might be there and do their work, but we don't know. We are not communicating. We're not exchanging, and I'm talking specifically about Russia as my area of focus.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Now that we've heard about the state of the field, generally, it's time to take a look at some examples of the research being done. Here is Professor Bucur discussing her book on disability history in Interwar, Romania.

**Maria Bucur:** I was doing a project about veterans and the Veterans Administration in Romania after the First World War. I discovered kind of a treasure trove of archival materials about what the Veterans Administration tried to do for veterans, and in those thousands of pages of material the most interesting things that I found were letters from disabled veterans writing about the inadequacy of the programs that had been set up to serve them. It gave me a window into the thing that I've always been interested in how people who are marginalized understand power relations. Before I worked on eugenics, I worked on the peasant population, on women in the interwar period, how these populations understand power relations, how they are able or not to intercede on their own behalf or on behalf of others just like them, to try to shake up the system, and to access the kind of state benefits that are promised to them. So, this was kind of a perfect example of how legislation that was very generous—in fact, the legislation that was passed in 1920 in Romania was incredibly, on paper, generous in comparison to other states that fought in World War I, like France who was their main inspiration. You look at Germany, Germany had an incredible set of policies that they passed and benefits. Romania on paper, was giving veterans not just political power. All men received the vote, but also that veterans would be the first to be given land after the land reform.

So a lot of economic power, right? Pensions, support for their children, free education, free health care, free legal assistance, free travel on trains, free access to wood. I mean, I could go down the line of these amazing things that only this category of citizens, disabled veterans, had access to. How large is this population? Well, on paper, 200,000, but actually I think it's much larger and I can say why. It's a significant percentage of the total population. Also, people who lived pretty much everywhere, and especially in rural areas, 85% of the population lived in rural areas at that time. Thinking through what it meant for somebody who lives in a village in the middle of Nowheresville, Romania, to be writing a message to the central government, explaining their own understanding of disability benefits, and how the local government and their neighbors are discriminated against them

was powerful. So, here are people who fully understand the rights, who are frustrated, who have been told repeatedly that your suffering, your sacrifices, and your heroism have created this. Romania doubled in size after World War I—this incredible political and territorial gain and you are entitled because of your heroism to a-b-c-d-e-f-g. Here you are trying to assert those rights and you are being turned down or worse.

Some of the things that I found out was that, for instance, in order to get—and this is kind of the medical framework for disability access and benefits—doctors were the gatekeepers for all these benefits. In order for you to claim the status of disabled veteran, you had to go before a commission, and the legislation and policies established levels of disability. I started getting into how do doctors define disability, what's in and what's out? Once you start thinking about this what's in and what's out, you realize that there's a lot more that's out than there's in. That's kind of how I got to it. My first book was on eugenics, and I'm doing my culpa. In the early 1990s, when I was working on eugenics, and because literally nobody else was working on the history of eugenics in Eastern Europe, I didn't have much to follow. So, I was interested in gender issues, and I was really interested in the way in which reproductive potential was defined, framed, controlled, limited in terms of gender relations, but, of course, that itself is connected to how able bodiedness and disability are defined.

I just was not seeing it then, and so what I'm doing now is I'm actually looking at the stuff that I did research on and things that I wrote in the 1990s and revisiting it in terms of thinking about how heteronormativity, for instance, and the ability to reproduce are framed as the norm, and then any kind of other performance of gender roles—and that includes men's performance, not just women—is then cast as deviant and degenerate and therefore imbricated with the kind of larger picture of how eugenicists think about health. What it is to be a useful human in the larger community in which you live, and how then able bodiedness and disability are framed as very much kind of having to do with an intergenerational responsibility. So, I started to recognize more and more how the values and the discourses that undergird how disability is defined for veterans is really on a continuum for how these biopolitical ideas about citizenship are framed and of what the new normal becomes in terms of who's marginalized and who is worthwhile by the state's efforts and who is deemed a burden, or somebody who absolutely needs to be isolated and prevented from reproducing. [laughs] I'm now kind of rewriting my own historical research but tending to the complexity of how this concept of the normal ablebodiedness and disability are connected to each other.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Professor Bernstein's first book in disability history is also about war veterans, but in this case, in the Soviet Union, after the Second World War.

**Francis Bernstein:** The book is about how the state managed the mass disabling of the Red Army and the way that they managed it was mostly through erasure. The title of the book is *Missing in Action Erasing Disability from the Great Patriotic War*, and so my book is about the various different programs of action to erase this group of people. There are three different programs that I focus on in the book. The first is just removing them from representations of the war, and that is something that that happened. If you've ever seen these amazing photographs of the Victory Day parade on Red Square, it is organized and rehearsed to an inch of its death. It's filled with beautiful young men all holding weapons and parading, and there was, of course, the column on top of Lenin's tomb, and the review stands and throwing the Nazi flags at the feet of Stalin and all that sort of stuff. It's really beautiful. A great deal of effort went into planning that parade, and in the orders of the parade, it says who is allowed to and who cannot participate in this parade celebration. Shockingly, the two groups that are not participating are women. Of course, we know that

many women served at the front not only in support positions, but in combat, and disabled men. They were gone from this mass showing of the victory over the Nazis.

They're not there. The first policy agenda I look at is just basically erasing their presence from representations of the war. If you look at posters, propaganda, we're all familiar with those fabulous wartime propaganda posters. There are no disabled men in any of them. You might find Russian soldiers with a little bandage around their head. There may even be a little bit of blood showing. Classic, right? But you don't see disabled people. They are gone from the representation of war. Another important moment in that and this is something I just found this document a couple of months ago. In January 1945, there was a command that was sent out to everybody in Sector V of the KGB. At that point, it's the NKGB. V was the Perustration sector. They were the censors, and it was sent out not only to domestic censors, but also all the military censors. Of course, everybody's letters are being opened, as you know, pro forma. They were informed that if they were to find any images of soldiers with disabilities, severe disabilities, including amputations, burnt faces or mangled faces or men who are blind, the images were to be removed because, and this is what the order says, they could be used by our enemies. With that and the parade, that's kind of the beginning of my book, talking about how this erasure happens at the level of representations. The second section of the book, the documentation section, is where we move from the representational to the pragmatic.

Here the focus is on an institution called (VTEK) Tech Vrazhdebna, which translates as Medical Labor Expert Commission. These were where all of the policy related to disabled soldiers once they got out of the hospital, was formulated by the ministry and later the commissariat and the Ministry of Social Welfare. These medical organizations in the Commissariat of Social Welfare were run by bureaucrats—none of the leaders were physicians. Basically, this was the commission that would determine whether or not you were indeed a war invalid, whether you deserve that title, and with it a pension. Anybody who works in the Balkans, anybody who works in Eastern Europe, is very familiar with this sort of thing because it was part of the Soviet model that really got transferred. The second part focuses on how these committees contributed to the erasure of these men from the war, from the memory of the war. They do that basically by redefining their disabilities out of existence. So, for instance, there were three categories. The first was for somebody who is so impaired that not only can he not work—and again, I'm using he very specifically here—but he needed help. He needed assistance to live. Category two initially was for guys who couldn't work but could take care of themselves. Category three was for guys who could take care of themselves, could work, but not at the same profession or pay rate as they had before.

So, you're talking about men who are working, but they're going to be paid much less doing much crappier work for the most part. Then there were those who, even though missing a leg, missing two legs, whatever it is, if they could hold down the same job they had before, they were not officially disabled and got nothing. So, what happens during and after the war is you have these TEK committees gradually moving these guys through the categories, and then they would change the definition of the different categories so that category two—which was, can't work and can take care of himself—became can work, but maybe not regular hours, maybe in lighter conditions, and with less pay. Then, category three would basically be you're doing fine. Once your injuries heal then you'd be moved off and you'd be recategorized as not an invalid. Bureaucratically, it's erasing them by producing fewer and fewer numbers of these people who qualify for these categories. Then, as more of them are not in these categories, the state can say, "look how good we did. 90% of all disabled veterans are working now." So that's the second policy agenda. The third involves hiding

their disabilities, and there are two ways that they did this. One was through prosthetics, and that happened very poorly.

The prosthetics industry was a disaster. Even particular kinds of prosthetics devices—I've written about this one arm that actually won the Stalin Prize because it was going to be the answer to getting all of these amputees back to work. Not surprising for any of us know anything about the history of technology in the Soviet Union, they were crap. They fell apart. It was almost impossible to get them because you had to go and stand in six different lines, and I have stories of guys missing three limbs who were forced to come back three different times and three different processes, which each took several different visits to get one particular limb and lines and fittings and going back into lines and all that sort of stuff. It was a failure. It was a global failure. It was one of the few places actually that the state allowed criticism. So, you would find tons of articles in the paper saying, "what a shame. This is an embarrassment for our war heroes and the disabled." But that really didn't change much. That was the one agenda on the side of the body. The second was because there were so many war veterans who were too impaired to take care of themselves and who had nobody who could support them, like a family member, they set up this series of invalid homes and there was this special kind of invalid home called the internaut, the Trudovoi invalid internaut.

These were these special homes that were set up specifically for disabled veterans, like there were other homes for people with disabilities. These were specifically for disabled veterans in ranks one and two. So, that third rank, they were not qualified to live in one of these. The point of these homes was to help them learn a trade, get some sort of job, and that was also a disaster for a number of reasons. First, the money. The state was broke. It was very difficult to find qualified personnel, or they were incredibly corrupt, and corruption was everywhere during and after the war. So, staffing them was very difficult. A lot of guys didn't want to live there because of the surveillance aspect of it. They didn't want to be told what to do, what time to be in, and all that sort of stuff. But again, it was not as simple as saying they were all rounded up over the course of a night and forcibly brought there. Many of them asked to go. They did not want to return to their families because they didn't want to be a burden on their families who already had too many mouths to feed. So, it goes a lot of the way towards explaining why disability is still something that is hush hush—is not really talked about by polite people today in Russian society.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Now let's move to Poland in the late 20th century to hear about Professor Zdrodowska's current book project.

**Magdalena Zdrodowska:** Right now, I'm doing research on amateur film makers, deaf filmmakers in Poland and in Eastern Europe. And again, that's the movement that I discovered in relation to United States where deaf people started using cinematography very early on to record sign language, but also to record the everyday life of their community. I had this feeling that if so many deaf people in the United States used film and cinematic technologies, probably something similar happened in Poland, but it was not that easy to find proof of because, again, the American Deaf films are in the Library of Congress. They're online at Gallaudet University. There is a collection. I couldn't find similar sources for Poland, and, at that time, I was doing research for my book that eventually didn't end up in the book, but I was talking with Polish deaf people, and I started asking them if they can remember if someone had a camera or were making films. It turned out that very many deaf people were doing this, but there was no trace of this artistic and cultural practice of doing films in the sources. So, that's once again the very same problem of, on one hand, institutional sources—like who's buying the cameras. If the Polish Association of the Deaf was supporting this movement, that's one thing. But on the other hand, there are not so

many films left. I think the problem is that neither institutions nor deaf people recognize amateur filmmaking, but also I think other forms of deaf art making as legitimate heritage that is worth presenting, and that is super frustrating.

When doing my research, just a few days ago, I came back from a two-week research trip—a field trip that I was trying to access the archives in the local branches of Polish Association of the Deaf. When I reached one of them, there were no documents, basically none, because they were changing their location and they decided they couldn't move all the archives. So, they just threw it away. The institution is not very interested in these materials. I decided to ground all the project in the interviews. I'm looking for the filmmakers and I interview them. When I ask them, "where are your films?" They say, "ah, I don't know, somewhere in the basement. I don't even have the equipment to watch them because there were 8mm or 16mm films." And they say, "well, right now I have my smartphone and I use it, so I don't even think about the old equipment." So, so these films and these art forms are not considered worth preserving neither by the institutions nor by the deaf people. So that's a big problem on one hand, but it is also something that forces you to look for this knowledge in a different way.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Now, here's Professor Galmarini talking about her upcoming book, which will be published in winter 2023.

**Maria Cristina Galmarini:** So, it's entitled *Ambassadors of Social Progress A History of International Blind Activism in the Cold War*. What the book discusses is the history of international blind activism from an Eastern perspective. What I'm really interested in this book is to critically discuss and analyze the contributions of socialist activists to the blind international movement and when I researched this book, I was very surprised to discover that at a certain point in the 20th century, Eastern European and Russian blind activists were considered embodiments of social progress by their counterparts in the Western world, and there are several reasons for that.

So let me give you a bit of a chronology. The Blind International Movement kicked off in the 1920s and had a moment of intensity and glory in really the late 1920s, early 1930, and then with the outbreak of World War II it almost died. It was not possible to meet internationally. It was not possible to travel. There were all sorts of economic reasons that didn't help, didn't support, the development of the international blind movement. Then, the movement started again after World War II, but, at that point, in a very different geopolitical context.

Western activists tried to establish contacts with activists in the so-called Soviet bloc. At the time, they were very curious about what was going on in the socialist countries. They had read that in the socialist countries, the blind represented themselves in their organizations. They had read about the social welfare systems that guaranteed by constitution and constitutionally guaranteed so many rights to blind people. They had read about the so-called workshops or industrial production training workshops, product production, training enterprises where blind people were received, vocational training and employment. Those were all the fortes, if you want, of how Soviet disability politics projected itself abroad. So, Western activists were very curious, and that was the time, the 1950s and 1960s, when in the West, people with visual impairments were largely unemployed, where in many parts of the world, the colonial world, or the colonized world, as well as the so-called Western world, they didn't have a constitutionally guaranteed social rights. So, in the eyes of this Western activist, in the eyes of some of them, the socialist model was at least interesting and appealing and fascinating, if not plainly progressive, as many of them thought at the time.

So, in the book, I talk about the long history of the international disability movement from the 1920s to the early 1990s, with a particular focus of the 50s, 60s and 70s.

When the debate, the interaction, the exchange of ideas between the East and the West was really intense and really productive for both sides, there was an exchange of technologies, ideas, approaches, conceptualizations of disability in all sorts of areas from education, employment rights, from a medical point of view, technological point of view, from the point of view of Braille printing and writing, you just name it. These activists were eager to know what their colleagues were doing in the rest of the world. They were eager to collaborate because the resources were limited. Now, this might sound like it's all good and great, right? In reality, there was a darker side to the story: The fact that the socialist activists were not simply advocates for their constituencies, but there were also diplomats, and they were doing the work of their governments. When they went abroad, they had two main tasks. First and foremost, to advertise the greatness of socialism of the Soviet Union in particular, and the Soviet model of re-educating, retraining, and employing people with disabilities. That was the task number one. There was no admission of flaws. There was, of course, everything was great in socialism. That's what the socialists were. These activists as diplomats were supposed to tell the world. The second task was to learn.

And this is very much in line with Cold War dynamics whereby the Soviet Union in particular, but all other Eastern European countries too, were asked to catch up and overcome. So, learn from the West in order to surpass the West, to become greater, in more progressive in all sorts of fields, military, economic, scientific and in this ability to. There were these two sides, and what I claim in this book is that socialist activists wore two hats as advocates: Disability advocates and they were personally committed to learn as much as they could and to collaborate as much as they could. But there were also cultural diplomats, and they were doing state work whenever they met foreign disability advocates.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Finally, I asked my guests what advice they'd give to a student or young scholar who is interested in the history of disability in Eastern Europe. Here's what Professor Bucur said.

**Maria Bucur:** You absolutely have to learn the language of the place that you are studying to a level of knowledge that will enable you to understand when people are talking to you about this ability in that language, because the language that's being used in different countries differs and it's really core to having a full appreciation. I am a traditional historian in this regard. Spend time in the place that you want to research, get connected so that you can decide if the passion that you feel now is matched by a kind of core commitment to the hard work without any guarantees for a job that comes after. I'm sorry to say, but there's very few jobs in East European anything. You work on Russia, and I mean from a kind of just purely job-related perspective. I hope that disability history sees a growing interest in terms of how jobs are framed in the future for both research and teaching kind of places. But it's a hope. It's not a reality. So, I think that the risk taking has to be something that you understand front and center from the beginning.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Now, here's some guidance from Professor Galmarini.

**Maria Cristina Galmarini:** One piece of advice would be to look at museums not only at archives and libraries, because there were museums for the blind, I can speak for sure. There were topological centers and museums of pedagogy in all the capitals of Eastern Europe, from Ljubljana to Zagreb to Warsaw to Moscow. Now, of course, in Prague, Budapest. I did a lot of my own research in the Museum of the Russian Society of the Blind

in Moscow and discovered that there are fantastic repositories that might be very interesting for a material history of disability.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** Finally, here's some advice from professors Zdrodowska.

**Magdalena Zdrodowska:** Well to do it, basically. I think there is so much to do in this field, and it is so fascinating. Because of the differences, it is really interesting to track them and to see them. I would recommend visiting East Europe, learning language if possible, and doing research. There are people—like in Poland, for example—scholars from different areas, from different fields in disability studies. To some extent, I think we are following this American or Western European path of people from critical cultural studies, from English studies, from sociology, coming into disability studies and forming them, but definitely the more perspectives the better it is. I think that when it comes to Poland, the research on disability art is quite strong and very rapidly developing, especially in the case of theatre and performance, because it also gives tools for interpreting what is happening in the public sphere with this performative attitude to protest, for example, but there is also a big need I think for research in more topics associated with social elements such as access to doctors or to services like education, for example. So, there is still areas where I think the research is needed and welcome, especially when someone comes from a different perspective. That's very valuable.

**Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon:** The four scholars we heard from today are part of a growing community of disability historians who focus on Eastern Europe. A wave of recent publications also testifies to the expansion of the field. In 2023, Romanian disability historian Radu Dinu and Swedish disability studies scholar Staffan Bengtson co-edited a collection titled *Disability and Labour in the 20th Century Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. This book features many chapters on disability history in various parts of Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Following the pattern we discussed in this episode, the temporal focus of these chapters is still on the state socialist period in the 20th century. In fact, the quantity of scholarship on disability history in Eastern Europe has grown so much that in 2022, Radu Harold Dinu published a review article titled "Recent Historiographical Trends in Scholarship on Disability and Socialism in Eastern Europe." This article is both an excellent summary of the existing scholarship and a testament to how much research has been done in the field over the last few years. In this episode, I've introduced you to just some of the scholars and research trends in Eastern European disability history. I hope that you'll learn something and that the field continues to flourish in the future.

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**Caroline Lieffers:** Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time. Bye bye!