Post-Catastrophic Cities: Total War and Urban Recovery in Twentieth Century Europe

Veranstalter: Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam; Martin Kohlrausch, Universität Bochum
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Bericht von: Malgorzata Mazurek, Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam; Joanna Wawrzyniak, Institute of Sociology, Warsaw University

In twentieth-century Europe, urban populations witnessed not only the consequences of modernity and scientific planning, but also mass destruction. Recently, historians of postwar Europe have emphasised both shared experiences of 'the extremes' (that is, extreme ideology and extreme destruction) as well as common challenges of recovery throughout the continent. This approach has shed new light on European reconstructions and has helped to venture new areas in contemporary international and transnational historiography, where Central and Eastern Europe – the main battlefield of World War II 'urbicide' (Karl Schlögel) – is probably the most neglected. At the same time, the aftermath of the war, which dramatically transformed cityscapes and the lives of their inhabitants, has remained largely unexplored in interdisciplinary urban studies.

A workshop organized in Warsaw (which was itself a very telling arena of planned urban destruction) aimed to compare 'post-catastrophic cities' as they reemerged from wars and political censures imposed by dictatorial regimes. In the introduction to the workshop entitled, „Post-Catastrophic Cities: Total War and Urban Recovery," STEFAN-LUDWIG HOFFMANN underlined the importance of Central and Eastern Europe in a revision of the conceptual framework of European urban history; systematic research on a region where *actual* total war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was waged would introduce wartime phenomena as starvation, genocide or mass resettlements to the social and cultural history of the twentieth-century European city. He also called for diachronic comparison (for example, the destruction of Sarajevo in the early 1990s with the devastated urban spaces of the Spanish civil war), which he said was necessary for rethinking the aftermath of wartime violence in a long-term perspective.

Addressing the state-of-the-art in urban history, organizers of the workshop called for shifting the focus from a top-down perspective – covering the well-researched histories of city planning and political regimes of reconstruction – to a bottom-up approach. Not only were post-catastrophic cities a 'playground' for urban experts and political regimes, they also constituted transitional social spaces for contingency. Be it an early postwar shift from war to peace, or the new politics of memory after 1989, individual experiences, expectations and memories shaped postwar urban spaces in multiple and politically subversive ways. Finally, organizers highlighted the newly emerging field of post-catastrophic urbanism, as best revealed by New York post-9/11. The exploration of differences and similarities, as MARTIN KOHLRAUSCH mentioned in the second introductory talk, should contribute to a better understanding of material devastation and reconstruction, both in the lived as well as the symbolic past.

LISA KIRSCHENBAUM was the first among panelists to stress that cities are not only physical places but above all social spaces constituted by imagination and memory. While discussing Leningrad in a comparative perspective, she pointed out that the city's material landscape stayed relatively intact after the siege, nevertheless its immense human loses affected the post-war community. At the same time, architectural attempts to modernize the city and to give it a grandiose past not always facilitated survivors either to remember or forget the tragedy in ways the city's planners had hoped. Therefore, Kirschenbaum proposed to shift the analytical framework of comparative studies of the post-catastrophic cities from the focus on their material destruction and reconstruction to research on changes in the 'mental maps' of the cities' inhabitants and on the tensions between individual remembering and material rebuilding. GRUIA BĂDESCU's paper, presented as one of the

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last in the workshop, corresponded particularly well with Kirschenbaum's initial presentation. Following Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Michel de Certeau, he proposed two approaches to contemporary Sarajevo: one is to explore the city from a physiognomic perspective of an outsider *flâneur*-observer; the other is to analyze the city through various practices of everyday life and distinctive meanings attached to the city by different groups of its residents. Using this double methodology, Bădescu showed that despite the fact that the city's material infrastructure expresses multiculturalism, the social groups inhabiting Sarajevo have been segregated since the 1990s.

Whereas Kirschenbaum and Bădescu presented rather general theoretical remarks and methodological suggestions, drawing on their research on traumatized cities, STEFAN-LUDWIG HOFFMANN'S paper showed how successful this approach might be in opening new research agendas. Taking the case of Berlin, he discussed the city's destruction as visual experience by examining the imagery of photographers and diarists who were in Berlin at the end of World War II. He pointed out that they proposed distinctive ways of portraying defeat and he distinguished between the Soviet triumphalist, American ethnographic (at the same time humanitarian) and German allegorical views of the city's devastation and despair. Considering the possible effects of American photography in the transition period from war to peace, Hoffmann emphasized that for the US public it was demolished Germany and not Eastern Europe that became the visual landmark of both the consequences of war and the postwar humanist empathy.

The papers of STÉPHANE MICHONNEAU and DAVID CROWLEY were especially interesting with regard to the discussion of a variety of roles that ruins might play in post-war communities. Michonneau told a story of a small town in Spanish Aragon: while the actual Belchite, destroyed during the Civil War, was kept intact by the Franco regime as a symbol of „red barbarity", the New Belchite was erected nearby as a showcase of the fascist government. By pointing out the various ways in which the residents of the twin towns have kept the ruins up to date, Michonneau stressed the discrepancies between images imposed by different political regimes and social memories of the inhabitants. DAVID CROWLEY gave an interesting overview of various, conflicting political and artistic images of the ruins, by using the case of post-1944 Warsaw. He also noticed how in the shadow of their narratives, the ruins served as a space for social practices such as prostitutions, squatting, alcoholism or black-market trade; as such they also became a subject of aesthetic statements. In contemporary Warsaw, the ruins are once again 'desired'; this time by right wing politicians who seek for legitimacy by making references to WWII history.

JAN MUSEKAMP took the conference participants on a tour to Szczecin (previously German Stettin) incorporated into Poland in 1945 and partially rebuilt by the communist authorities. Musekamp traced the origins of the architectural choices made in the course of town's restoration: after the war, both the city's Slavonic origins and the modern concepts of the Athens Charter were enunciated, while recent attempts have been to recreate prewar German cultural heritage. Finally, TARIK CYRIL AMAR concentrated on Lviv as a microcosm of the current West Ukrainian 'politics of history.' While discussing several commemorative initiatives in Lviv related to World War II, he argued that scholars too often interpret the historical imagination of contemporary Ukraine as a nationalist reversal of the former Soviet propaganda. Asserting the strong influence of nationalism, Amar argued, should be understood as only the beginning of a study of complex social phenomena in post-Soviet culture(s) of memory.

The final discussion concentrated on finding common frames for the discussed papers. FRIEDRICH LENGER proposed „reclaiming and negotiating identities in post-catastrophic cities" as a working framework, but at the same time he stressed that as a historian he would not be opposed to more eclectic perspectives toward the subject at hand. The debate which followed focused on the possible gains and losses of using such broad categories as 'identity' and 'memory' in historical research. While they may

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be useful concepts in relating urban research of historians to other social science fields (DOROTHEE BRANTZ), their analytical force may be relatively weak (STEFAN-LUDWIG HOFFMANN). Another unresolved question of the debate was why pre-war eminent theorists such as Walter Benjamin or Georg Simmel still offered the most useful tools for analyzing the post-war cities. Rephrasing this question, it could be asked whether this 'new' urban research can lead to any significant change in existing urban theories.

In most of the papers, post-catastrophic cities were presented as reservoirs of social memory and politics of commemoration. The workshop's discussions showed an interest for a bifurcated approach to the examination of urban recovery: first, for a historicisation of transitory moments, such as the late 1940s or 1989-agenda in Central and Eastern Europe; and secondly, for a further exploration of cultural continuities connected to urban catastrophes. By combining temporality of disruption with actor-centered regimes of memory, the workshop innovatively embedded history of urban destruction in recent discussions on post-1945 and post-1989 Europe.

Conference overview:

INTRODUCTION

Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Center for Contemporary History, Potsdam)
Martin Kohlrausch (Bochum University)

PANEL 1

Lisa Kirschenbaum (West Chester University), Remembering and Rebuilding: Leningrad after the Siege in Comparative Perspective
Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Center for Contemporary History, Potsdam), Gazing at Ruins: German Defeat as Visual Experience

PANEL 2

Stéphane Michonneau (Casa de Velázquez, Madrid), Ruins and the Heritage of Civil War: The Case of Belchite in Spain
Jan Musekamp (Viadrina-University Frankfurt), A New Polish City on German Ruins? Rebuilding Stettin/Szczecin after 1945

PANEL 3

David Crowley (Royal College of Art, London), Memory in Ruins: Remaking Warsaw after 1944
Tarik Cyril Amar (Center for Urban History of East Central Europe, Lviv), After the 'Golden September': Recovering and Re-Covering Memories of War in Lviv, 1989-2008
Gruia Bădescu (London School of Economics and Political Science), Reading Post-war Sarajevo as Text

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