

**Europe's East in the 20th Century.
Contemporary Challenges in Historical
Cultures**

Veranstalter: Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena. Europe's East in the 20th Century. Historical Experiences in Comparison

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The opening conference of the newly founded Center for Advanced Study „Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena. Europe's East in the 20th Century. Historical Experiences in Comparison“ addressed some central questions of Eastern European historical cultures. The organizers, inspired by the ideas of Hungarian Jewish novelist Imre Kertész, among others, ambitioned to foster non-teleological and non-normative reflections on various forms of historical representation. While the subject was delineated geographically rather than strictly thematically, the participants were requested to properly historicize the varied historical cultures of the region and highlight their defining contemporary features.

During his keynote address, public intellectual and former dissident ADAM MICHNIK (Warsaw) discussed the negotiated way Poland exited communism in 1989 as well as its major consequences for the post-dictatorial present. Michnik likened the Polish path to both the preceding Spanish and the largely simultaneous Hungarian way of overcoming dictatorship. Calling himself a „believing“ but non-practicing historian, he explicated that in spite of the moral victory of 1989 and the notable successes that followed the elite pact, the results left many Poles unsatisfied. He maintained that the assessment of the consequences of the negotiated transition divided Polish society between those who defended the pact and propagated an inclusive form of democracy and those who believed that the logic of decommunization should overrule even the basic requirements of liberal democracy. Michnik criticized the latter group in no uncertain terms, charging that they were willing to distinguish neither between collective and individual responsibility, nor between sinners and their sins. He

thus warned of the dangers inherent to post-communist anti-communism, reaffirming the need to dissent when attempts are made to impose unduly simplistic versions of history.

In his discussion with JAN ČULÍK (Glasgow), Czech film director JIŘÍ MENZEL (Prague) explained that his primary motivation had not been to provide analysis or evaluation of historical events through the medium of cinema. He emphasized that, much rather than aiming to directly serve political interests or moral agendas, his impulse had been to depict the reactions of ordinary people to everyday events (even when these events were eminently part of larger historical processes) to thereby expose the comic nature of human existence characterized by a chasm between words and deeds. He also clarified that his ironic perspective on humanity was not meant as normative critique but was intended, above all, to reveal the humaneness of historical actors.

STEFAN TROEBST (Leipzig / Jena) discussed novel developments related to the process of coming to terms with the past. He described how the European Union and particularly the European Parliament newly started to develop their own agenda in the politics of history, pursuing the controversial goal of European identity building through history. On the other hand, he also emphasized the continued primacy of national forms and modes of remembrance and the significant differences and not infrequent incompatibilities between various national historical cultures. As the result of comparative reflections, he maintained that it made much more sense to conceive of a North-Western core region of Europe and two, Eastern and Southern peripheries, both with more recent experiences of dictatorship, instead of simply reiterating the East - West dichotomy. While the post-dictatorial historical cultures of the Eastern and Southern regions of Europe are certainly not analogous, the largest new democracies of both regions, Spain and Poland have left behind periods of amnesia (*Vergangenheitsvergeessenheit*) and seem to be increasingly obsessed with their pasts (*Vergangenheitsversessenheit*). Troebst also proposed that South-Eastern Europe might be seen as the region connecting Eastern and Southern Europe whi-

le possessing a specific profile and intricate problems of its own.

MARIA TODOROVA (Urbana-Champaign) discussed how with the passing of time and the turnover of generations the actual legacy of communism was inescapably fading away but external attitudes and perceptions towards the ex-communist region appear to be more durable. They even manage to foster largely corresponding processes of self-stereotyping. In other words, according to Todorova, the Balkanist discourse characteristic of the 1990s subsided only to be largely replaced by another normative and prescriptive discourse on the legacy of South-Eastern European communism. She explained that while the former discourse was meant to create distance between Europe and this discursively „semi-Orientalized“ region, the latter was gaining strength simultaneously with (and certainly not irrespective of) attempts to integrate South-Eastern European countries into European structures. Moreover, Todorova maintained that there were no powerful „binary nostalgic discourses“ in the region, claiming that what was recurrently identified and denounced as immoral nostalgia in fact often had the primary aim of critiquing the present. Last but not least, she argued for the need to expose dependencies and subordinations within Europe in order to deprovincialize Western Europe – before the post-colonialist project of provincializing Europe could be attempted with any hope of success.

TAJA VOVK VAN GAAL (Brussels) discussed the central ambitions of the House of European History as well as the major challenges faced by its creators. Acting as the academic leader of this ongoing project, she explicated that this unique museum shall present a layered view of things that originated in Europe, managed to gradually spread over the continent and continue to be relevant today. One of the major challenges she addressed is that the museum will have to realize its vast agenda in a building of modest size and without overburdening the visitors with textual *explanata*. Calling on experts to contribute to the implementation of the project, she also enumerated a number of crucial dilemmas such as how to depict the unity of Europe as well as

elucidate the history of its internal and external borders, how to present history from the macro perspective and incorporate the personal level and, third, how to treat stereotypes (i.e. whether to avoid or rather reinterpret and reuse them).

PAWEŁ MACHCEWICZ (Warsaw / Gdańsk) presented the plans for another major new museum. He clarified that the museum on the Second World War to be opened in Gdańsk emerges not only out of recent Polish-German discussions and disputes, particularly on the question of expulsions, but has the broader goal of introducing less commonly emphasized aspects of the war, such as the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the brutal nature of the occupation of Poland and the fate of Soviet prisoners of war. The project hopes to foster their integration into the dominant historical narrative. Furthermore, Machcewicz explained that the museum would not only show that unprecedented crimes were committed in the 1930s and 1940s but also how the events of these horrific times determined the subsequent history of the continent. The purpose is to oscillate between local-national and universal levels that, it is hoped, shall further comprehension of both. More concretely, the city of Gdańsk and the surrounding region of Pomerania ought to serve as chief examples for the creation of an overall narrative.

MILAN RISTOVIĆ (Belgrade) spoke of the interrelations between historical memory, national identity and the shaping and reshaping of spaces. He argued that both of the markedly different Yugoslav political projects, that of the inter-war years and that of the communists, proved unable to foster a solid historical fundament. The otherwise centralized first Yugoslavia did not manage to develop a common cultural and educational agenda and thus failed to establish a community of memory. Even though the parameters of memory were radically different in communist Yugoslavia, potential clashes of memory were never truly renegotiated and satisfyingly settled so much so that not even the history of the communist party could serve as a consensual matter. Ristović pointed out that after the ethnocentric turn that brought a new wave of selective and reductive renderings of history

in the course of the 1990s, the chances to write a more encompassing and complex history of Yugoslavia seem to have improved. Thus, the possibility to create that common form of memory that never was recently emerged – ironically enough, for an entity that no longer exists.

IRINA SHERBAKOVA (Moscow) spoke of Russia and its acute contemporary problems. She discussed how the longing after a mythic golden age in the rather desperate situation after the fall of the Soviet Union soon met with the official ambition to foster pride and idealize the strong state and authoritarian rule while serious confrontations with the 20th century became marginalized after Perestroika. The new official stance even included the positive evaluation of the role of Stalin, which gradually (and partly to the embarrassment of the initiators of his rehabilitation) gave way to a veritable flood of Stalinist symbols and kitsch in the last half a decade. More recently, this development started to become the source of controversies though. Sherbakova affirmed that the memory of Stalinist terror had not disappeared but the almost singular focus on victims continued to overshadow the attention devoted to crimes and their perpetrators. In her view, the latter fact exposed how the trauma still needed to be meaningfully tackled while it also revealed the limitations characterizing current Russian public discussions.

In his presentation on the complicated and ever-changing relations between Germany and Eastern Europe, one of the two directors of Imre Kertész Kolleg, WŁODZIMIERZ BORODZIEJ (Warsaw / Jena), insightfully sketched the last 130 years of multidirectional and discontinuous developments, focusing primarily on the immediate neighbors of Germany, the Poles and the Czechs. Claiming that the period can be divided into two radically different parts, those before and after 1945, Borodziej at first depicted the world prior to 1914 when German colonial fantasies of the ever redefined „East“ still focused on the Middle East rather than Eastern Europe, when members of the local-national elites of East Central Europe tended to receive their training at German universities (without thereby becoming Germanophiles) and when na-

tional contestation took place primarily within the Habsburg Monarchy with the dominant German experience that of being on the defensive. Borodziej also emphasized that the radicalizing experience of the First World War and particularly the German occupation of large stretches of land in Eastern Europe made German imperial plans turn to this region and take on much more brutal forms that ultimately culminated in Nazi policies. He argued that the story after 1945 was much less dramatic. So much so that the 1960s were characterized not only by highly selective perceptions but also by widespread mutual ignorance: 1968 exposed the depth of the division of Europe as actors on the two sides of the Iron Curtain had little to offer to each other. In his concluding remarks, Borodziej maintained that due to another unexpected turn of events, relations have significantly improved and have indeed never been better than in the present. He asserted that within the frame of the European Union the main lines of division no longer run between old and new member states and despite significant differences between political cultures as well as levels of wealth, most contested issues between Germany and its Eastern neighbors are negotiable and do not threaten with undermining their partnership.

Fellow Kolleg Director JOACHIM VON PUTTKAMER (Jena) aimed to historicize the relations between Russia / Soviet Union and the region west of it but east of Germany. At first, he explained that the Imre Kertész Kolleg does not intend to study Russia on its own terms but finds its history nonetheless relevant since it indubitably heavily impacted the region under scrutiny. In his presentation, von Puttkamer chose to focus on three temporal frames, namely on the turn of the century, on the Soviet period and on the present age to explore relations to and representations of Russia / Soviet Union and understand the formation of hardly compatible memory cultures. He explained that a veritable Russian Complex, a form of perception oscillating between affirmative devotion and fearful hostility characterized not only German but also Polish and to some extent Czech considerations on Russia around 1900. In the second part of his presentation, he clarified that the

Soviet Union could be seen through an ideological, anti-communist prism, or as the mere continuation of Russian imperialist traditions (where ideological considerations were marginalized) but also as the country that deformed communism (a particularly widespread notion during the sixties and seventies). Third, while both the memory of Katyn (for Russian-Polish) and the Hitler-Stalin pact (for Polish as well as Baltic and Romanian memory cultures) have become important reference points in the post-communist present of East Central Europe, they provide sources of conflict with Russia that has often preferred to dismiss these events. Von Puttkamer also affirmed that the concept of a Europe between Russia and Germany has limited analytical value in the present. At the same time, he pleaded for the integration of communism as well as Russian history into European memory. Last but not least, he articulated his conviction that instead of simplistic dichotomizing, the multi-layered and often inconsistent historical record of the 20th century needed to be analyzed and reflected on.

The conference „Europe's East in the 20th Century. Contemporary Challenges in Historical Cultures“ thus combined thorough scholarly analyses of some central questions of Eastern European historical cultures with the discussion of two major ongoing museum projects by respective insiders (Paweł Machcewicz and Taja Vovk van Gaal) as well as contributions by a highly prominent public intellectual (Adam Michnik) and an internationally celebrated artist from the region (Jiří Menzel). It thereby not only fostered deeper understanding of the various historical cultures and the divergent forms of contemporary memory cultures of this region but also shed light on some crucial intellectual and institutional attempts to reshape them.

Conference overview:

Keynote Lecture

Adam Michnik (Warsaw)

„Das Erbe der Diktaturen / Dziedzictwo dyktatur“

Podium Discussion

Jiří Menzel (Prague)

„Der ostmitteleuropäische Film – Ironische Annäherungen an das 20. Jahrhundert/ Stře-

doevropský film – Ironické uchopení dvacátého století“

Moderation: Jan Čulík (Glasgow)

Panel I: Europäische Grundlagen

Chair: Volkhard Knigge (Gedenkstätte Buchenwald/ Jena)

Stefan Troebst (Leipzig/ Jena)

„Postdiktatorische Erinnerungskulturen im Osten und Süden Europas“

Maria Todorova (Urbana Champaign)

„Nostalgia – the reverse side of Balkanism?“

Taja Vovk van Gaal (Brüssel)

„Eastern Europe in the future House of European History“

Panel II: Praktische Erfahrungen

Chair: Attila Pók (Budapest)

Paweł Machcewicz (Warsaw/ Gdańsk)

„Das Museum des Zweiten Weltkriegs in Danzig“

Milan Ristiović (Belgrade)

„Konkurrierende Erinnerungen an Tito-Jugoslawien“

Irina Sherbakova (Moscow)

„Dimensionen und Konflikte russischer Geschichtskultur“

Panel III: Europas Osten zwischen Deutschland und (Sowjet-)Russland

Chair: Norbert Frei (Jena)

Włodzimierz Borodziej (Warsaw/ Jena)

„Deutschland und das östliche Europa“

Joachim von Puttkamer (Jena)

„Russland und das östliche Europa“

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