

### East Central Europe in the Twentieth Century. Roundtable on the State of the Art of Historical Studies

**Veranstalter:** Pasts Inc., Center for Historical Studies and Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena; Central European University (CEU), Budapest  
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**Bericht von:** Mare van den Eeden / Ilse Joseph Lazaroms, History, Central European University Budapest

On 11<sup>th</sup>, 12 May 2012, the conference "East Central Europe in the 20th Century. Roundtable on the State of the Art of Historical Studies" took place in Budapest. The organizers of the conference, Balázs Trencsényi from Pasts Inc., Center for Historical Studies and Ferenc Laczó<sup>3</sup> from the Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena, emphasized the need to discuss the value of regional frameworks in historical research, especially after the initial euphoria of the post-89 period, when East Central Europe was often treated as a region, has waned. Their questions included: What is the current position of the regional in relation to global and national history writing? How do historians interested in the East Central European region deal with global and local studies? What to do about the differences between the ways "local" and "non-local" scholars study East Central Europe? The various panels dealt with alternative approaches to the study of the region, different spatial conceptualisations, the uses of regional studies in various localities through diverging and conflicting national interpretations, the study of dictatorships, and the challenge of integrating non-mainstream themes and actors into mainstream national and regional historiographies.

The roundtable started with a panel tackling several methodological approaches in researching the East Central European region. JOACHIM VON PUTTKAMER (Jena) emphasised the merits of the comparative approach in dealing with East Central Europe. He stressed the fact that in a region that is so difficult to define (with no consensus concerning its borders), the comparative approach "depending on the problem one studies" continues to promise new insights. HOLLY CA-

SE (Ithaca/Jena) addressed transnational approaches to East Central Europe. She argued that in the state of flux the field currently finds itself, historians should reconsider their questions and test the benefits of transnational history. For Case, the transnational is ultimately a means to understand the national, as well as to go beyond it: historians should use its methodologies to understand national history, but also to transgress that history. BALÁZS TRENCSENYI (Budapest) asked whether it is possible to write a regional intellectual history. He addressed both the temporal and the spatial dimensions of this question, arguing that we should give up on "verifying" the region and instead approach regional conceptualizations heuristically. Seeking to establish a dialogue between political language on the national and non-national level, it is possible to draft an alternative intellectual map of culture, different from the dominant Western European canon, which at the same time challenges local national narratives and frameworks of interpretation. MACIEJ GĄBRYNIA (Warsaw/Jena) closed the panel by returning to the comparative approach in the context of Marxist history and intellectual cooperation in East Central Europe. He highlighted the importance of making proper choices in comparative projects, and of exploring whether various national historiographies contain similar narratives or beliefs. In the lively discussion that followed, the specificities of transnational and comparative perspectives, the challenges these approaches face, and the role of the global and the national were debated further.

The next panel dealt with different approaches to regional studies. MICHAL KOPEČEK (Prague) spoke about the various stages of regional Czech conceptualisations of the Central European region in which German, Bohemian, and Czech perspectives played a role. He analysed how political-symbolic geographies were constructed in which the *topoi* of Europe and Eastern Europe, as well as the conceptualizations of Central Europe as an entity between East and West, were important. Currently, there is a post-dissident liberal nationalist reconsideration of the Czech historical paradigm.

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Addressing Polish regional conceptualisations, BÅ [U+0081] AÅ»EJ BRZOSTEK (Warsaw) discussed similar topics while pointing to Polandâ€™s specific historical-geopolitical position as both coloniser and colonised. Its manifold relations to its neighbours, implying various responsibilities, are reflected in its historical writing. Different urban centres (Warsaw, Wrocław, and Krakow) have different historiographical traditions and conceptualisations of the region. GÃ [U+0081] BOR EGRY (Budapest) explained the Hungarian debate on East Central Europe, tackling various historical traditions in the country that heavily depended on their (political) situatedness and different perspectives on (the existence of) the region. One recent development specific to Hungarian historiography is the emergence of the issue of Hungarian minorities, and the trend to combine historical writing on the history of East Central Europe with writing the histories of minorities. PAUL GRADVOHL (Nancy) enriched the discussion about regional conceptualizations by offering a French perspective on the conceptualisation of East Central Europe. The initial limited interest in East Central Europe in France, during the second half of the twentieth century, was greatly influenced by immigrants from the region. It was above all such scholars who made it into an important research subject. ANDREA FELDMAN (Zagreb) closed the panel by discussing regional and at times conflicting conceptualisations in the post-Yugoslav space. Briefly covering all post-Yugoslav states, Feldman showed that in these countries scholars deal with identity issues, nationalist canons, the legitimization of national statehood, and post-communist interpretations of communism and the Yugoslav state. Her overall assessment was that historians in these countries are now freer in their treatment of the communist past. New regional landscapes have come into being, such as the Mediterranean area, the Slavic space of history, the Balkans, and Europe. The panelâ€™s commentator, DIANA MISHKOVA (Sofia), pointed to the commonalities in the various approaches: (1) the issue between the national and the regional, in which the regional emerges as a condition or context for playing out the national; (2) the waves of regiona-

lisation over time; (3) the question of national diversity and competing regional conceptualisations within national historiographies; (4) interplays (internal and external) on two parallel levels â€” the political and the academic â€” that legitimise the existence of the region; (5) the comparative and transnational dimension of these intellectual approaches; and (6) the tension between structural history and symbolic geography. These remarks guided the ensuing discussion.

On Saturday morning, participants continued the discussion with a stronger focus on disputed territories and histories of conflict. HANNES GRANDITS (Berlin) spoke about the relations between Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, and the historiographical discussions of what was first called the Kingdom of Serbs-Croats-Slovenes, then the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and, after World War II, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Initially the official party line had to be followed, but from the 1980sâ€™, 1990s onwards the historiographical scene diversified. Historians integrated their discussions into European schools, joined publications saw the light of day, and national histories are now being rewritten. RENÄ‰ KÄœPPER (Munich) discussed Czech-German relations by focusing on new bilateral research projects and institutional cooperation. He argued that one could observe positive developments in the (academic) relations between Germany and the Czech Republic. There is a broader social dialogue between Czechs and Germans about their history. Nevertheless, one should not forget that simplistic views still linger on and the history of the *Sudetendeutschen* in particular remains a point of friction. In his talk, TIBOR FRANK (Budapest) addressed disputed territories and shared pasts in modern East Central Europe, presenting a multi-volume book publishing project, the relevant volume of which he edited together with Frank Hadler. Frank focused on problems of methodology, of how to avoid the repetition of historical facts, the relevant differences between historiographical traditions, and the fact that there are always interests that influence research projects. Last but not least, he raised the questions of who engages in the writing of history and to what extent they can be considered in-

dependent scholars.

The fourth panel focused on the particularities of the history and memory of the East Central European region as compared to Western Europe. DIETMAR MÄœLLER (Leipzig/Jena) offered a critical account of key concepts in dealing with the East Central European past. There exists a certain rivalry, a competition of memories, between the different legacies â€œ Fascism, National Socialism, and Communism â€œ of the region, which prevents the formulation of a new â€œculture of remembering.â€ [U+009D] More research ought to be conducted on the dual â€œ or triple â€œ legacy of the region. Here, the focus on the nation as an analytical unit has the effect of homogenising and thus limiting research agendas. BOGDAN IACOB (Bucharest) discussed the latest trends in the study of communism, arguing that the field has moved away from binaries and is now embedded in more transnationally oriented discussions. The notion of the â€œNylon Curtainâ€ [U+009D] has come to convey the idea that the Cold War borders were permeable. Accordingly, contemporary studies of communism often focus on border-crossing activities, supported by the â€œfertile dichotomyâ€ [U+009D] of isolation versus entanglement. Iacobâ€™s own research on Romania is an example of complementing the transnational approach by case studies under the motto â€œto know more about less.â€ [U+009D] PÄ‰TER APOR (Budapest), together with JAMES MARK (Exeter), presented a critical overview of the state of memory studies on the communist experience. Scholarly efforts in the field are currently coming to terms with previous political regimes elsewhere in the world that impact the study of communism in East Central Europe. On the epistemological side, memory studies currently grapples with the concept of â€œauthenticityâ€ [U+009D] in relation to representing the past. Furthermore, memory studies as a field has undergone a transnational/transcultural turn, moving towards a focus on travel, borders, and intellectual migration or, more generally, the multiple directions of memory. As such, it hopes to overcome the question of competitive victimisation and focus instead on â€œthe politics of becoming European.â€ [U+009D]

CONSTANTIN IORDACHI (Budapest) presented new trends in the study of Fascism, arguing for a new research agenda that does not take Western Europe as a measuring stick or a negatively charged comparison identifying various â€œdeficits.â€ [U+009D] Instead of conceptualising regimes based on an ideal-type definition, it is more salient to focus on the various geographical/regional faces of Fascism. Yet regional studies of Fascism in East Central Europe suffer from under-conceptualisation, a crucial point of improvement for the field. Finally, in her study of contemporary right-wing extremism in Hungary, MARGIT FEISCHMIDT (Budapest) focused on the social aspects of nationalism and asked how ethnicity became an important element of nationalism, and how power relations work in everyday practices. By means of interviews, Feischmidt analysed the class dimension of everyday forms of neo-nationalism. In the discussion, participants questioned what was â€œnewâ€ [U+009D] about contemporary forms of nationalism and/or political extremism. There seemed to be widespread agreement that a focus on historical continuities offered a more fruitful way to analyse contemporary politics, and that extremist ideologies were not directly tied to class positions. Secondly, participants tended to agree that competitive martyrology should be put aside and contemporary historiographical studies should instead aim at conveying commonalities in European history.

The last panel concentrated on marginalised voices in the history of East Central Europe. MARIA FALINA (Budapest) argued that religion, instead of being considered an â€œobstacle to modernity,â€ [U+009D] should return as a main analytical tool in historical studies of the region. Taking the perspective of members of religious communities helps to rethink regional boundaries as well as the ways in which these communities build relations to the nation state. As such, the study of religion or, more precisely, the social implications of church institutions, encourages the analysis of Europe-wide patterns of transformation. INES KOELTZSCH (Prague) and FERENC LACZÄ‰ (Jena) discussed East Central Europe as one of the major centres of Jewish life and culture until 1945. The post-1989

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period has seen increased attempts at integrating local Jewish history into its global version. Jewish Studies has never been more integrated into the academic mainstream than it is now, when it has returned to East Central Europe in the symbolic role of rethinking the national bias of mainstream history writing. Finally, CELIA DONERT (Potsdam) presented her research on the history of the Roma people, as a transnational people that are recurrently perceived as an international "problem" while their own sense of identity is often that of an outsider. Donert defended her choice to keep the nation-state as a frame of reference in researching the Roma under the Czechoslovak communist state.

The final discussion concluded that, without discarding the nation as an analytical unit in historical research, it is important to transform our understanding of the national so as not to end up with seemingly disconnected parallel stories of the history of Europe. There was widespread openness towards trans-disciplinary approaches and non-geographically defined research questions. The conference also ought to result in a publication where the topics, issues, and questions addressed and the conclusions drawn will be revisited.

### Conference Overview:

*Panel I: East Central Europe in the 20th Century: Comparative, Transnational, Entangled?*

Commentator: László Kontler (Budapest)

Joachim von Puttkamer (Jena): "East Central Europe in the 20th Century in Comparative Perspective"

Holly Case (Ithaca, Jena): "Transnational Approaches to East Central Europe in the 20th Century"

Balázs Trencsényi (Budapest): "The Challenge of Studying Political Thought of East Central Europe: Between European Embeddedness and National Autarchy"

Maciej Gąsny (Warsaw/Jena): "Writing Comparative Histories of Historiography"

*Panel II: Spatial Configurations. The Regional Problematic in Various National Imagi-*

*naries*

Commentator: Diana Mishkova (Sofia)

Michal Kopeček (Prague): "On Czech Regional Conceptualizations"

Bartłomiej Brzostek (Warsaw): "On Polish Regional Conceptualizations"

Gábor Egry (Budapest): "On Hungarian Regional Conceptualizations"

Paul Gradwohl (Nancy): "On French Regional Conceptualizations of East Central Europe"

Andrea Feldman (Zagreb): "On Regional Conceptualizations in the Post-Yugoslav Space"

*Panel III: Between Conflict and Resolution. Dealing with Competitive National Interpretations*

Commentator: Włodzimierz Borodziej (Warsaw/Jena)

Hannes Grandits (Berlin): "On Serbian-Croatian-Bosnian relations"

Renata Kupper (Munich): "On Czech-German relations"

Tibor Frank (Budapest): "Disputed Territories and Shared Pasts in Modern East Central Europe"

*Panel IV: The Dual Dictatorial Legacy of the 20th Century: Current Uses and the Challenge of Historicization*

Commentator: Ulf Brunnbauer (Regensburg)

Dietmar Mäüller (Leipzig/Jena): "Current Discussions on the Dual Legacy of the 20th Century"

Bogdan Iacob (Bucharest): "New Trends in the Study of Communism"

Péter Apor (Budapest) and James Mark (Exeter): "Studying the Memory of Communism"

Constantin Iordachi (Budapest): "New Trends in the Study of Fascism"

Margit Feischmidt (Budapest): "Studying Contemporary Right-Wing Extremism"

*Panel V: From Margins to the Center? The*

*Integration of Non-National Phenomena and Non-Mainstream Historical Actors*

Commentator: John Neubauer (Amsterdam)

Maria Falina (Budapest) â€œOn the Historical Study of Religionâ€™™

Ines Koeltzsch (Prague) / Ferenc LaczÃ³ (Jenna) â€œOn Jewish Historyâ€™™

Celia Donert (Potsdam) â€œOn the History of the Roma Peopleâ€™™

*Final Discussion and Closing Remarks*

Tagungsbericht *East Central Europe in the Twentieth Century. Roundtable on the State of the Art of Historical Studies*. 11.05.2012-12.05.2012, Budapest, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 25.07.2012.