

Stepping Back in Time: Living History and Other Performative Approaches to History in Central and South-Eastern Europe

Veranstalter: Deutsches Historisches Institut
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The workshop „Stepping Back in Time“ focused on an emerging field of research that concerns itself with the experiential component of various practices of reviving, restaging and appropriating events from the past in the present. The phenomenon, collectively described as „re-enactment“ or „living history“, manifests itself in a variety of expressions, ranging from large-scale battle re-enactments to thematic tourist attractions and individual art projects. Therefore, the panel series organised by SABINE STACH (Warsaw) and JULIANE TOMANN (Jena / Princeton) deliberately avoided a narrow definition, thus creating a broad angled picture and preserving the interdisciplinary character of the issue.

Since research on the topic is particularly sparse in the Central and South-Eastern European context, the talks provided a unique opportunity for many young experts from disciplines in humanities and social sciences as well as artists to exchange their respective state of the art research. While cultural studies have already started to embrace the bodily experience of (re)living history, historians perceive it as a rather novel approach that opens up the field to a large audience, thus challenging traditional historiography. Hence, the conference also aimed at positioning the historian within the wide spectrum of re-enactment despite the professional instinct opposing it, as RAPHAEL UTZ (Jena) emphasised in his opening remarks.

The first panel sought to analyse the national dimensions of re-enactment as well as to map the research scene in Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria, providing a broad overview of projects and experts in the field. Incidentally, it highlighted the problems arising from work within the field by demonstrating the inability to find a common ground in defining the multitude of expressions and methods approaching the sub-

ject. KAMILA BARANIECKA-OLSZEWSKA (Warsaw) presented the Polish case, describing most event-based re-enactments as a means to „close unfinished businesses and correct errors of the past“, thus making them deeply political in character. She closed with the warning that most actors were unaware of their political responsibility as well as the potential to manipulate, urging academia to bridge this discrepancy. Opposing Baraniecka-Olszewska’s analysis, MELINDA HARLOV (Budapest) identified the Hungarian focus on re-enactment to be on the celebration of folklore and strongly linked to state institutions. The contrary notion could be found in IGNAT STOYCHEV’s (Sofia) approach to Bulgaria. The legal advisor claimed to have found no evidence of political influence during his own research on re-enactment groups and highlighted their educational mission.

Moving away from the historians’ sphere of influence, the second panel put emphasis on artistic performances of historical subjects and the importance of memory, which, though strongly connected, needs to be accounted for separately according to the three panelists. MARIA-ALINA ASAVEI (Prague) presented two recent Romanian exhibitions. Both the video installation „Istории MonuMentale“ and „Sons and Daughters of Brâncuși“ stressed the idea of different and potentially contradictory memories existing side by side while at the same time deconstructing a hegemonic narrative of the past. Leaving national history behind and presenting a transregional approach to the memory of dictatorship in South America and South- and Central Eastern Europe, political scientist CATERINA PREDA (Bucharest) placed emphasis on the human body as the main instrument of creating and performing memory. She highlighted similarities between art performances in Romania, Argentina and Chile, all of which aimed at placing disappeared people symbolically back into public spaces. Thus, according to Preda, rather than re-enacting a specific event in the past, artists stress the lingering presence of a collective trauma by using the performance as an interruption of daily activities and only loosely referencing past events by positioning bodies accordingly. The bodily experience of the past was also present

in NELA MILIĆ's (London) presentation on Yugo Yoga, an artistic practice based on the Yugoslavian „Fiscultura“-movement and modelled on poses of socialist statues and symbolism. She highlighted different notions of re-enactment, ranging from physical memory to nostalgia and individual coping strategies.

In the following key note, VANESSA AGNEW (Duisburg / Essen) addressed genocide as a potential topic of historical re-enactment. She gave several examples of art projects addressing the Shoah which clarified her approach of going beyond a realistic aesthetic experience and focus instead on memories largely shaped by medial mediation. As Agnew pointed out, the turn of the millennium brought the rise of social media, larger access to historic sites and new sources that ultimately lead to a relaxation and wider acceptance of the breaking of taboos, thus forcing scholars to engage more strongly with the issue of re-enactment. Using the examples of Artur Żmijewski's controversial video project „80064“, Claude Lanzmann's movie „Shoah“, „Kamp“ by Dutch artists Hotel Modern and Gunter Demnig's „Stolperstein“-initiative, she explored the limits and potentials of re-enacting a traumatic past. While being dramatically different in execution and confronted with substantial criticism, the projects all chose non-realist forms of re-enactment to bring echoes of the past to the present rather than relying on similarities. Agnew argued that these rather unexpected „invitations to a certain experience generate an impression of collapsed time“, thus connecting past and present more strongly than a seemingly authentic re-enactment ever could.

ANDREAS KÖRBER (Hamburg) opened the second day with an educational view on the topic. The history education expert lamented that schools still display a chronological approach to history and presented his three-layered model of didactic competence that could equip students with a tool for critical analysis. Reflection, Körber closed, could be the key to benefit from re-enactment. Rather than posing the question of „What happened then?“, he encouraged teachers to ask „What happens here?“, thus bringing the past to the present rather than the other way around.

The subsequent panel explored the differ-

ences between historical knowledge and experience, stressing the plurality of history rather than emphasising a singular narrative. SANELA HODŽIĆ (Sarajevo) examined the media representation of „White Ribbons Day“ commemorating the genocide in Prijedor during the Bosnian war. War crimes in Bosnia were also the topic of NENA MOČNIK's (Ljubljana) talk. She presented her research on sexuality of mass rape-victims in the Bosnian conflict, having previously worked with those willing to act out their trauma in public performances. Močnik specifically addressed the individual perspectives and arising problems when working with victims and critically questioned her own role as a researcher and supervisor within the process. Sticking to the overarching topic, ELMA SELMAN (Sarajevo) approached the theatre as a „space where memory can happen“, highlighting its potential to criticise, process and address the future at the same time. Performances, she summed up the previous talks, are not about reliving the past, but about bringing the past to the present.

The fourth panel focused on problematic heritage as a balancing act between the ritualised search for identity and commercialised commodification as well as the (re)appropriation of historic space. Above all, it seemingly proved the dissonance between past and present as inherent to heritage, as the ensuing plenary discussion concluded. NATAŠA JAGDHUHN (Jena) discussed the performative potential of a museum visit by demonstrating the parallels between the (re)opening ceremonies of the AVNOJ museum in Jajce as well as the museum's changing symbolism over time. Continuing this train of thought, JOVANA VUKČEVIĆ (Podgorica) used Tito's train as an example for history being turned into a commodity, running at considerable risk of being „disneyfied“ as a tourist attraction. TANJA SCHULT (Stockholm) presented yet another controversial form of dealing with a traumatic past by exploring POLIN's Daffodil Campaign. She specifically questioned the relation between commemoration and re-enactment as well as ethical problems arising from it.

The final panel focused on Polish identity politics, while specifically addressing the in-

teraction between space and historical performance. Moving from the 20th century to prehistory, RALF HOPPADIETZ and KARIN REICHENBACH (Leipzig) investigated the relation between the New Aryan Movement and re-enactment related to archaeological finds that manifest mainly in music and the use of historic clothes and equipment. They concluded that the current attempts of nationalist appropriation are based on an understanding of archaeology as a more unobstructed, direct approach to the past. The use of visual evidence seems to emanate authenticity while at the same time leaving room for interpretation. BRYCE LEASE (London) explored the performative perspective of two of Warsaw's most notable museums. He traced links between architectural tropes and history at POLIN and the Uprising Museum and explained how both buildings solved the problem of violence as their central theme by putting rebirth rather than death on display. Following the main finding of the conference, this can also be considered an attempt to utilise history for the future rather than restage it. Questions related to the importance of space were also at the centre of ZUZANNA BOGUMIŁ's (Warsaw) talk on a series of sites dedicated to murdered Polish priest Jerzy Popiełuszko. She explored the differences between object- and performance-based museums, claiming that authenticity fades from the spotlight as soon as experience is more convenient to „ensure the continuity of culture and belonging“.

In conclusion, the conference was a crucial event in the emerging field of re-enactment studies in the lesser researched area of Central and South-Eastern Europe and brought forth underlying key issues to be dealt with in the future. It benefited from its interdisciplinary approach, vivid discussions and the vast variety of topics. Accordingly, due to the enormous range of living history examples at hand, summing up the conference proved to be an arduous task. Nevertheless, there was one aspect everyone agreed on: The multitude of large scale projects, the sheer number of people involved as well as the individual and collective importance ascribed to them alone justify a scientific approach. Scholars of all fields, Agnew proposed, acknowledging the forward-looking perspective of re-enactment,

are compelled to engage with the public, discuss potential boundaries and concern themselves critically with the post-factual, which is more important than ever these days. Therefore, Bryce and Körber once again stressed the need of presenting society with the tools to reflect upon historical re-enactment, thus truly democratising history. Agnew then concluded the workshop with a plea for the establishment of re-enactment studies as a branch of humanities which no longer treats living history as an „irritation to historiography“ but rather an integral part of it.

Conference overview:

Miloš Rezník (Warsaw), Raphael Utz (Jena), Juliane Tomann (Jena/Princeton), Sabine Stach (Warsaw): Opening Remarks

Section I: Living History & Re-Enactment – National Perspectives

Kamila Baraniecka-Olzewska (Warsaw): Polish Historical Re-Enactment: Between Hobby and Mission

Melinda Harlov (Budapest): The Scope of Living History Examples in Hungary

Ignat Stoychev (Sofia): Living History in the Bulgarian Context

Chair: Juliane Tomann (Jena / Princeton)

Section II: Art Performances & History

Maria-Alina Asavei (Prague): Performing History and Living Memory in Recent International Art Exhibitions in Romania

Caterina Preda (Bucharest): Living Statues: The Role of Art of Memory in Post-Communist Romania

Nela Milic (London): Performing Nostalgia: Yugo Yoga

Chair: Annika Wienert (Warsaw)

Keynote

Vanessa Agnes (Duisburg/Essen): Re-Enacting Genocide

Input

Andreas Körber (Hamburg): Living History: Place, Purpose or Topic of Historical Learning?

Section III: Dealing with a very Recent Past

– *Performative Practices in South-Eastern Europe*

Sanela Hodžić (Sarajevo): The White Bands: Living an Ignored History

Nena Močnik (Ljubljana): Acting Out the Painful Past: Community Theater from Overcoming Trauma to Embracing Forgiveness after the Conflict

Elma Selman (Sarajevo) Performing Temporary Monuments, Addressing the Past: Regional Theater Initiatives in South-Eastern Europe

Chair: Bryce Lease (London)

Section IV: (Re-)Staging Memory – Difficult Heritage between Commodification, Nation Branding & Ritualisation

Nataša Jagdhuhn (Jena): Re-Visiting Yugoslavia's Day of Republic in Jajce: The Stage and the Script

Jovana Vukčević (Podgorica): The Price of Memory: Commodifying Legacies of Unwanted Heritage in the Balkans

Tanja Schult (Stockholm): Remembering together – POLIN's Daffodil Campaign and Holocaust Memory

Chair: Sabine Stach (Warsaw)

Section V: Polish Identity Politics form a Performative Perspective

Ralf Hoppadietz/Karin Reichenbach (Leipzig): Archaeological Open-Air Museums and Prehistory Re-Enactment in Germany and Poland: From 20th Century Politicizations to Current Attempts of Nationalist Appropriations

Bryce Lease (London): Affective Encounters, Disavowed Narratives: POLIN & the Warsaw Uprising Museum from a Performative Perspective

Zuzanna Bogumił (Warsaw): The Museum Effect: From Religious Ritual to Performative Experience – The Case of Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko Museums

Chair: Iwona Kurz (Warsaw)

Final Discussion

Input by Iwona Kurz, Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska, Andreas Körber, and Vanessa Agnew

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