On 23rd and 24th November 2017, the Institute for German Culture and History of Southeastern Europe (IKGS), the Institute of Political History in Budapest, Collegium Carolinum, and the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies hosted the conference “Paths of Transition / Transformation: Local Societies in Southeastern Europe in Transition from Empires to Nation States after World War I” on the premises of the graduate school in Munich.

IKGS Director Florian Kührer-Wielach opened the conference and officially welcomed the 25 participants and guests to Munich. His opening remarks were followed by Gábor Egry, director of the Institute of Political History, and Martin Zückert, managing director of the Collegium Carolinum. The presence of these three institutions already set the stage for what was to follow. The primary research regions of the three institutes served as a common theme throughout the conference as the participants regularly referenced Romania, Hungary and the former Czechoslovakia in the following days.

Uneven transition can be explained with a broad range of factors. Revealing how and why these were effective in certain cases and failed to have an effect on other ones is a key issue for understanding the transition process. Comparison of disparate (or even similar) stories across space allow for revealing these factors behind different local outcomes and paths of transition. The conference brought together a wide range of case studies that presented material for further comparisons and the comparative study of certain problems.

The conference was organised into five panels, spread over the course of the two days. Panel One approached the broader conference topic by first highlighting the issues of „Nations and New Orders”. FLORIAN KÜHRER-WIELACH (Munich) provided what the panel’s chair Martin Zückert called an unofficial keynote speech. In his presentation on transfer, transition, and transformation in Transylvania and beyond, Florian Kührer-Wielach introduced many of the topics discussed by the conference’s participants. JOHANNES GLEIXNER (Munich) followed by introducing the case of the Czech lands and looking into progressives and socialists in Czech republican ideology in the years leading up to World War I. A similar time period was also discussed by CĂLIN COTOI (Bucharest), who presented his research on public hygiene in the context of nation building in 19th- and early 20th-century Romania.

OTA KONRÁD (Prague) then shifted the temporal focus to the years after the war, highlighting the role of violence in the immediate transition period from 1917 to 1923 in the Bohemian and Austrian lands. THOMAS VARKONYI (Vienna) closed the first panel by analysing the attribute “Galician” as anti-Semitic code in Hungary throughout the 1910s and 1920s.

In the afternoon of this first day, Panel Two moved on to post-imperial biographies, in order to add a bottom-up perspective to the discussions so far. The panel was chaired by Enikő Dácz (IKGS) and opened by ROK STERGAR (Ljubljana), who described the end of the Habsburg Empire and the beginning of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenses through the lives of writers and bureaucrats in the Slovene lands. SVETLANA SUVEICA (Regensburg, Chisinau) offered a related perspective on the case of Bessarabia and the biography of Chisinau’s former mayor, Pantaleimon V. Sinadino, in particular. With the biography of György Bernády, the former mayor of Târgu Mures, JÁNOS FODOR (Cluj-Napoca) ended the second panel by sharing the life story of a person, who managed to be politically successful both before and after the Great War.

After this multifaceted first day of presentations, the second was to prove even more eventful. A staggering three panels and one round table discussion were on the agenda.
Panel Three opened by discussing local societies in transformation. After chair Eric Weaver introduced the panel’s participants, ATTILA SIMON (Komárnó) presented the case of Košice in the immediate post-war period, where a consensus between the local community and the new authority seemed possible for a while, despite the shifting centre of power from Budapest to Prague. JERNEJ KOSI (Ljubljana/ Graz) provided insight into another border region of the former Kingdom of Hungary, Prekmurje in today’s Slovenia, which shared some of the same characteristics. ENIKŐ DÁCZ (Munich) concluded the panel with a double analysis of transition in Transylvania, examining the towns of Sibiu and Brașov in the years from 1918 to 1922, which underwent quite divergent paths of transition at that time.

Panel Four, chaired by Rok Stergar, remained close to the topic of local transitions while shifting attention toward more comparative perspectives. GÁBOR EGRY (Budapest) provided a view into the influence of professional networks in the newly “Romanian” regions of Banat and Maramures. His research showed how interethnic and corporatist regional networks could help local actors to successfully safeguard their positions in society there. IVAN JELIČIĆ (Trieste) continued by looking at the city of Fiume (today’s Rijeka) and how local actors reacted to the changing political climate, going from a culturally Italian-dominated autonomous city in the Hungarian Kingdom to a free state and Italian city in the 1920s.

The final panel of the conference, chaired by Svetlana Suveica, ultimately dedicated itself to “peculiar regions, peculiar people”. JULIA RICHERS (Bern) first presented interwar biographies in Carpatho-Ukraine in the context of the Hungarian-Ukrainian/Soviet power struggle in the area after World War I. ERIC WEAVER (Debrecen) then moved on to another „border people“ of the former Kingdom of Hungary, the Bunjevci in the country’s south, bordering the Kingdom of Serbia. He painted a picture of the complex situation this catholic, Serbo-Croatian speaking group found itself in after 1918. The last presentation of the conference came from SÉGOLÈNE PLYER (Strasbourg), who looked into experiences of transition in Bohemia, particularly in and around Hradec Králové.

The conference concluded with a round table discussion led by Gábor Egry, in which he, Ota Konrád, Ségolène Plyer and Julia Richers discussed the overall perspective for further research on the conference topics. They asked themselves how to situate these rather short periods of transition in the longue durée of things and whether what may be seen as clear watersheds in retrospective was even visible as such at the time. Furthermore, they touched upon the personal perspective of local protagonists caught between local, regional, national, and imperial notions, as well as the potential to generalise findings from the area. An open debate with the audience highlighted once more the crucial role of local experts and bureaucrats in transition, the power of individual agency, and the problems of groupness in trying to describe such historical processes.

In her closing remarks, Enikő Dácz summed up the main findings, points of contention and necessities for further research, announced the publication of selected conference papers and urged further comparative projects in the near future.

Conference Overview:

Welcome and Introduction
Florian Kührer-Wielach, Director of the IKGS, Munich
Martin Zückert, Managing Director of the Collegium Carolinum, Munich
Gábor Egry, Director of the Institute of Political History, Budapest

Panel 1: Nations and New Orders
Florian Kührer-Wielach: Transfer, Transition, Transformation? Transylvania and beyond
Johannes Gleixner (Munich): From the Countryside into the Center: Czech Progressives and the Notion of »Czech Socialism« as Republican Ideology
Călin Cotoi (Bucharest): Social Modernity and International Hygiene Conferences: Nation Building and Public Hygiene in 19th Century Romania
Ota Konrád (Prague): Violence, Nation and the New Order: The Bohemian Lands and Austria during the Transition Period, 1917-
1923
Thomas Varkonyi (Vienna): »Galicia« as an Anti-Semitic Code in Hungary (and Austria) during and after The Great War

Panel 2: Post-imperial Biographies
Rok Stergar (Ljubljana): »We will make fools of ourselves if nothing comes of Yugoslavia« Transition from the Habsburg Empire to Yugoslavia from a Native Perspective
Svetlana Suveica (Regensburg/Chisinau): (Post-imperial) Identities on the Russian-Romanian Borderland: The Biography Twists of Panteleimon V. Sinadino
János Fodor (Cluj-Napoca): György Bernády: A Case Study of a Post-imperial Biography

Panel 3: Transforming Local Societies
Attila Simon (Komáro): Alternativen des Machtübergangs. Kaschau 1918–1919
Jernej Kosi (Ljubljana/Graz): Transforming Local Identities: Prekmurje after the Dissolution of Austria-Hungary
Enikő Dácz: Local Societies in Transition: Brașov and Sibiu

Panel 4: Comparative Local Transitions
Gábor Egry: Shoulder to Shoulder? Local Professional Networks and Institutions, Local and Regional Solidarity in the Emerging Romanian Nation State 1918-1925
Ivan Jeličić (Trieste): Political Elites and Counter-Eites in a City Searching for a Place in the Post-Habsburg Era

Panel 5: Peculiar Regions, Peculiar People
Julia Richers (Bern): Identifications in Transition: Interwar Biographies in Carpatho-Ukraine
Eric Weaver: The Nation that Was Not to Be. Reactions of Bunjevci and other South Slavs in Hungary to Revolution and State Change at the End of the First World War
Ségolène Plyer (Strasbourg): The Goodness of the Monarchy, the Gains of 1918. German and Czech Change Experiences on Regional Scale in Bohemia, 1914-1924

Round Table Discussion: Perspectives for Further Research