

The Environmental History of the Central European Borderlands since 1980s

Veranstalter: Department of German and Austrian Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Datum, Ort: 20.09.2019, Prag

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In September 2019, the Department of German and Austrian Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, organized a workshop for researchers dealing with the contemporary environmental history of the Central European Borderlands. By coincidence, the workshop took place on the same day as the Global Climate Strike. The participants thus in a way contributed to the efforts to help the climate in their own, academic way, despite not being present at the rally itself.

Today, the borderlands between the former Eastern Bloc and the West represent a nearly seamless space that was formerly separated by antagonistic politics. The divide between the two European macro-regions remains visible even long after the end of the Cold War and the enlargement of the European Union to the east. Differences in the use of land on either side of the border are closely related to the quality of the environment found there. That makes this area attractive for research of the relationship of man and nature in contemporary history. Even though ecological activism was difficult under dictatorial socialist regimes, ecology became an important topic in the 1980s and was one of the triggers for the revolutions of 1989.

Thus, the aim of the workshop was to test how environmental history can help to deepen our understanding of contemporary history of the Central European borderlands and to what extent it can serve as a local laboratory for exploring different paths in the modern and postmodern values of capitalism and (post-)socialism.

In the keynote speech, DOUBRAVKA OLŠÁKOVÁ (Prague) characterized the research field of environmental history in the Czech Republic and in Central Europe af-

ter 1989. She pointed out the difference between classification of environmental history in the academic discussion in the Czech Republic / Central Europe, where it was initially connected with historical geography, and in Western Europe, where it was traditionally linked with the social sciences and humanities. Following this contradiction, she focused on the actors on environmental history; she argued that the (contemporary) Central European environmental history should broaden its focus from traditional actors (nation, state) to society. Discussing the influence of the „Iron Curtain“, the Cold War and the emerging social movements on the environment and vice versa, environmental history can help to denationalize contemporary history and historiography as such. Some of the presentations fulfilled her appeal to analyze society as the crucial actor in environmental history. This also became a part of questions in the after-panel debates. Apart from the traditional actors, Olšáková also pointed out the still prevailing absence of animals as actors in history. This animal turn as an emerging topic in environmental history was – among other themes – intensively discussed in the after-keynote-debate.

In the first panel, different kinds of environmental pollution – soil, air, and water – were the prevailing topics. JONAS STUCK (Munich) presented his project at the research group Hazardous Travels at the Carson Center Munich, in which he focuses on waste movement across the German-German border. Stuck pointed out that Germany was politically divided, but ecologically connected. He showed that the attempt of West Germany to externalize the waste of a modern western lifestyle to an eastern country came back via polluted groundwater or toxic smoke. He also drew attention to a paradoxical correlation: how the export of West German waste to East Germany corresponded to an increase in environmental attention. Here, he demonstrated that the protest cultures of both sides of the border were able to cooperate from 1988 on.

ALEXANDRA WEDL (Basel) presented her PhD project on air pollution in Czechoslovakia, which she tries to see through the lenses of knowledge circulation. She asked

how knowledge about air pollution was created and how it circulated in a communist-controlled society. She identified information in the then-contemporary magazines. The recognition of this information within a broader population is, however, not clear yet and will be a subject of her future research.

KATEŘINA VNOUČKOVÁ (Prague) told the audience about a case of the pollution of the Czech-Austrian border river Thaya. This case confirms the routine that the state causing the pollution usually tries to postpone negotiations to solve the problem, which means to change behavior. The unique aspect about the case Vnoučková described is that a western company polluted eastern territory. Apart from this fact, she also highlighted the continuity in the interstate negotiations over the year 1989.

The presentation from MARKO ZAJC (Ljubljana) dealt with a cross-border river, too. He presented an interesting case of the river Mur. Its watercourse oscillates on the border between Slovenian and Croatian (and also Hungarian) territory. On the maps, its course continues according to the old cadastre, where it forms a border. In fact, its course changes in relation to geographical and environmental circumstances. Zajc linked his findings with a phantom borders concept – he argued that the concept of phantom borders should not be restricted to former political borders, but, on the contrary, it can be applied to a research of borders that still exist. He also mentioned the problem of the political approach to the solution of this border river dispute. While adapting the stream of the Mur river to the borderline through its regulation, an environmental problem of decrease of the ground waters has been created.

In the following panel, the environmental/nature protection played the main role. PAVLA ŠIMKOVÁ (Munich) presented the perks of the transboundary environmental protection in an area formerly divided by the Iron Curtain – the Šumava National Park and the Bavarian forest. The main point was the disappointment of the expectation on the cross-border cooperation in the environmental issues. Despite the cooperation of both sides, there is often a different view of nature conservation or dealing with natural dis-

asters. She also mentioned the specific position of the Šumava National Park in the Czech public debate – politicians (often more than professionals in the field) express their opinion on the solution of environmental problems, while for wealthy people it has become trendy to buy summer houses there. The Bavarian forest, on the other hand, was rather insignificant in comparison to the other Bavarian natural heritage.

However, as ZHANNA BAIMUKHAMEDOVA (Munich) argued, the Bavarian forest has played an important role in shaping the local identity. Local people perceive this area as their own and often disagree with external (though professional) approaches to nature conservation. Baimukhamedova illustrated this with the historical case of the creation of the national park, when locals felt excluded from the decision process, and further with the contemporary discussion of the return of wolves to the wild in the Bavarian forest area.

ANNA BARCZ (Dublin) elaborated on the position of the Białowieża Forest in the Polish national culture, partly in comparison with the Belarusian side. Similar to the Bavarian case, the Poles perceive the Białowieża Forest as national heritage, but their approach to the nature protection is rather vague and economic interests prevail. According to Barcz, the main voice of the forest on the Polish side of the border are the foresters. This leads to a paradoxical situation that despite having a prominent role in the Polish history and national culture, the forest has been protected to a much smaller extent than on the Belarusian side of the border.

DANIELA NEUBACHER (Budapest) took up the topics of environmental protests and cross-border networks in her presentation on Gabčíkovo-Nagymáros protests. In her research, she asks how Austrian activists contributed to the Hungarian efforts to stop the building of this water dam and to which extent the protesters from both countries were able to create a common public sphere in the borderland (similarly as in the case of the German waste, this took place already in the late 1980s). As examples, Neubacher mentioned bilingual publications and slogans on posters. She pointed out the strong visual-

ization as an important factor for intercultural understanding. Unlike the strong common sphere between Hungarians and Austrians, the Czechoslovak activists were not significantly involved in the protests, due to the Hungarian-Slovak animosity and a disinterest on the Czech side, she argued.

Both panels were followed by discussions in which participants often returned to the topics of the keynote, such as linking environmental topics with society (rather than taking them as a national political issue), the role of environmental topics in social movements (especially Neubacher, Stuck), and marginally also the animal turn (Baimukhamedova, Zajc, Barcz).

TOBIAS HUFF (Mainz) had the difficult task to wrap up the workshop. He connected the presented findings with his own personal experience of perception of the cross-border pollution problems in the 1980s and 1990s. His main finding from the workshop was a connection of environmental history to the present, because many of the cases discussed in the presentations are still not solved today (e.g. watercourse of the Mura River, waste management in Germany, pollution of the Thaya River). This confirms the fact that the importance of borders in Central Europe remains strong even to this day. We can also see now that the states of the former Eastern Bloc have little interest in solving environmental problems. Is there a solution? Huff mentioned the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution from 1979 as an initial point, when the environmental issues allowed to make contracts across the border. According to Huff, today „we need another iconic movement so that borders become less and less important to solve environmental problems. Today, the environmental problems cannot be solved in a national frame.“

Apart from the connection of environmental history topics to the present, this intensive one-day workshop showed the importance of environmental history for Central European borderlands, where the environment played an important role in the relationship between the West and the East, both before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Regarding the participants' background, a successful combination of researchers at vari-

ous stages met at the workshop – both beginning and advanced doctoral students, post-docs, researchers from other fields who deal with environmental history rather marginally – and all of them brought different perspectives on the field. There were different approaches used in the respective presentations and related research: cartographic (Zajc), use of visual media and documents (Stuck, Wedl), sharing the authentic experiences of the participants of the examined events (Neubacher, Vnoučková, Baimukhamedova) and exploration of the relationship between nature protection and identity (Šimková, Barcz). Various perspectives and approaches have confirmed the multidisciplinary, which is inherent to the field of environmental history. Although modest in terms of the number of presentations and its duration, the workshop was an important contribution to the ongoing research in this field.

The workshop was organized in the framework of the research network „The Border in the National and Transnational Cultures of Remembrance between Czechia and Bavaria (2017–2020)“, which is funded by the Bavarian-Czech Academic Agency.

Conference overview:

Keynote lecture

Doubravka Olšáková (Prague) ‘The nature has circumscribed a circle about me that I can’t cross’: Environmental history since 1989 – trends, directions, and limits

Panel I: Pollution

Chair: Václav Šmidrkal, Prague

Kateřina Vnoučková (Prague): Pollution of the Thaya River as a cross-border problem

Alexandra Wedl (Basel): Air pollution in Czechoslovakia: Transnational perspectives and discourses

Jonas Stuck (Munich): Behind the Trash Curtain. The movement of waste in Cold War Germany's Toxic Borderlands from the 1980s until the Fall of the Wall

Marko Zajc (Ljubljana / Koper): Environmental issues and border river disputes: the case of the Slovenian-Croatian border

Panel II: Nature protection

Chair: Ota Konrád (Prague)

Pavla Šimková (Munich): Transboundary Natures: Human and More-than-Human Mobilities in Bavarian Forest and Šumava National Parks

Zhanna Baimukhamedova (Munich): This Land is Mine: History, Identity, and Environmental Thinking in the Bavarian Forest Region

Anna Barcz (Dublin): Re-bordering the forest – the case of Białowieża

Daniela Neubacher (Budapest): Actors of System Change. Cross-border networks during the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros protests

Tobias Huff (Mainz): Workshop wrap-up

Tagungsbericht *The Environmental History of the Central European Borderlands since 1980s*. 20.09.2019, Prag, in: H-Soz-Kult 28.01.2020.