The knowledge factor: Refugees in Central and Eastern Europe, 1912–2001

Veranstalter: Victoria Harms / Jan Surman, Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe, Marburg
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The last annual convention of the Leibniz Graduate School investigated „THE KNOWLEDGE FACTOR: Refugees in Central and Eastern Europe, 1912–2001“. Not only the knowledge of and about refugees in East Central Europe during the last century was debated but also the social construction of „the refugee“ itself. In the welcome note, Peter Haslinger, Director of the Herder Institute, highlighted the contemporariness and relevance of the topic. In particular, he contrasted the antagonistic position of Eastern European states towards the refugee crisis today with their countries’ migratory past.

In the first panel, AGATA DOMACHOWSKA (Torún) and PÉTER VATAŠČIN (Pécs) investigated two case studies in South Eastern Europe. Domachowska discussed the reception of refugees in Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro during the Kosovo crisis in the late 1990s. She analyzed the differences in admission practices and narratives to shed light on the social reactions as well as government actions. Domachowska concluded that, from a humanitarian point of view, most governmental measures had been ineffective. „Success“ rather depended on regional if not local conditions.

Vataščin analyzed the ambiguous attitudes of locals and forced migrants in the city of Subotica (today Serbia). He elaborated on a „set of knowledge“ shared by both sides and the variety in local attitudes: some distance themselves from the forced migrants and new arrivals claiming and blaming them for a „change of atmosphere;“ others recognize the refugees’ potential to enrich the local culture. Interviewees overall emphasized the city’s multi-ethnical heritage and inter-ethnical peace that has made the city attractive, while simultaneously articulating concerns and prejudices. Some also regard the migrants’ positive perception of the city, their success in finding jobs and sustaining their social status with suspicion. Vataščin explained that this „set of knowledge“ existed on a meta-level but did not interfere with daily life, proving less of an obstacle to integration than often assumed.

The second panel addressed individual migration stories: MIROSLAV TOMEK (Prague) and BRIAN GEBHART (New York) presented two, albeit very different, distinguished persons: Mykyta Shapoval and Theodor Schiemann. The Ukrainian politician and sociologist Shapoval, member of the Ukrainian Social Revolutionaries party, left his home in 1919 due to the revolutionary upheavals. Tomek explained how in exile Shapoval, director of the émigré Ukrainian Civic Committee in Prague, sought to create a scientific network with the support of the Czechoslovak government. However, he was unsuccessful in permanently establishing either himself as a scholar or schools specializing in Ukrainian topics and language. Without tangible benefits for the new Czechoslovak state, the government eventually withdrew its financial support in the mid-1920s.

Gebhart examined how imperial visions of Kaiser Wilhelm I. merged with the interests of the Baltic émigré and „expert refugee“ Theodor Schiemann, who had fled Russification in Latvia in 1905. Adopting the Russophobe teachings of his mentor Carl Schirren, Schiemann churned the Kaiser’s imperial ambitions and Russophobe attitudes to corroborate German claims to the Baltic region. Once Estonian and German troops captured the region from Russia, Schiemann was rewarded with a post at the University of Dorpat (today Tartu), where he established the discipline of ‘Ostforschung’, which as a science legitimized claims the region and sought to prove German superiority over Slavic, especially Russian, people and culture. Until today, Schiemann serves as an admonishing symbol of the instrumentalization of history for imperial goals.

ALEXANDER GOLUBEV (Toronto) analyzed the relationship between Bolshevik Russia and the large group of Finish communist known as „Red Finns“ who fled to Karelia in northern Russia after the Finish Civil War in 1918. Already in the 1920s, the Red Finns occupied leading administrative positions in the
autonomous region of Soviet Karelia. However, Golubev pointed out that this was not a sign of the hosts’ charity. Instead, the Bolsheviks intended to use the displaced Finish communists to advance their control and exploit their regional knowledge to secure domination over the region.

Day two started with an interdisciplinary panel on the reception of repatriates. SETH BERNSTEIN (Moscow) opened with the presentation „Returnees or Refugees?“: although Soviet repatriates (displaced, former POWs, and forced migrants) following World War II were compatriots of the USSR, they were at best perceived as a burden and often stigmatized as traitors. Official reintegration efforts remained largely ineffective. This failure of the administration as well as of the population casts doubts onto the war’s glorification as Great Patriotic War. PAUL VICKERS (Gießen) explored the representation of Poles who were resettled in former German territories in Poland’s new West. Vickers engaged socialist-era sources (ego documents) to explore the memory of the people rebuilding their lives in the new environment and their relation to national memory. Vickers confirmed Bernstein’s assessment: ethnic homogeneity is not and never has been a guarantee for solidarity.

ROBERT ADRZEJCZYK (Torún) analyzed the highly confidential Polish state project of resettling refugees from the Greek civil war in the Bieszczady Mountains in the early 1950s. Andrzejczyk analysed the intentions and policies of the Polish government and illustrated the different periods covering thirty to forty years. His case study showed that it took the Greek arrivals about 20 years to adapt to the new situation. Most of the refugees initially believed their stay to be only temporary. Over time this hope faded and the refugees moved to other Polish areas. After the dictatorship in Greece vanished, in the 1970s, several returned to their erstwhile home country. Reintegration, however, proved just as difficult. Today about 4.000 people in Poland consider themselves as of Greek origin.

The final panel focused on more recent migration to and from Russia. First, SVETLANA BOLTOVSKAJA (Marburg) offered a detailed analysis of the African diaspora in the USSR. She explicated the failed state project of the Soviet government to gain influence in sub-Saharan Africa, by promoting educational immigration. The scholarships program was suspended in the 1990s, which lead to the transformation of the former students to refugees, who were stranded in Moscow unable to return home. Yet migration persisted, as some mistook Russia as a gateway to northern Europe. With many asylum requests denied, most of these migrants, many of them former students, live in Russia now illegally.

JOANA FOAMINA (Warsaw) presented her upcoming project on Russian political activists in Poland. Foamina’s goal is to explore the increasing trend of emigration and to comprehensively identify pull and push factors. Pursuing the question „Why did people leave and how does their knowledge maintain and shape the host country?“, she also seeks to analyze the transfer of political activism from home to host country.

ILSE LAZAROMS’ (New York) delivered the keynote speech „Origins Revisited: The Lost Landscapes of Joseph Roth’s Eastern Europe.“ on Joseph Roth’s life in exile and its effects on his writing. On the one hand, the loss of his home, his statelessness, and the psychological agony leveraged the Galician author’s creativity; but on the other hand, it drew him into alcoholism. Exile and migration informed Roth’s mission to transmit his intercultural knowledge in the spirit of enlightenment. His self-identification as „hotel patriot“ and self-identification with this mission increased the longer Roth was removed from his spiritual home of Galicia. Lazaroms illustrated his longing with edgings of the Galician landscape by Hermann Struck. The ambivalent position of outsider and insider, an ambassador and an uprooted framed Roth’s creative output, exemplified in such works as ‘The Wandering Jews’. By linking Roth’s fate as a displaced person to his literary pieces, she emphasized the currency of Roth’s enlightenment mission.

Most presenters operated with a rather vague definition of „refugee.“ Several presentations can be placed in the broader field of migration studies, and convincingly demonstrated that migration, if not fully voluntary, leads to the very similar effects on the individual, the host country, and home society as flight. All participants contributed significant
case studies and results to the topic of the conference. Possible discrepancies between external definitions and self-definition are to be treated cautiously and carefully, a task which the conference participants mastered successfully. Today’s European refugee crisis — a result of the increasingly globalized world — is yet another, recent example of migration, which urges us to re-examine the conditions, circumstances, and challenges of refugees and „refugeedom“ (Peter Gatrell), both of which are integral parts of the history of the European continent. Conferences such as this one are the basis for a comprehensive understanding of today’s challenges and serve as a well-founded call for joint action to deal with such issues, past and present, in a humanitarian, legal manner.

Conference overview:

Panel I
Chair: Jelena Ðureinovi´ c (Justus-Liebig-University, Gießen)
Agata Beata Domachowska (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toru ´ n): Lessons learned? The Balkan States’ Narrations on the Kosovo Refugees Crisis.

Panel II
Chair: Jan Surman (Herder Institute, Marburg)
Miroslav Tomek (Charles University, Prague): From Politician to Sociologist: Mykyta Shapoval and Ukrainian Sociological Institut.
Brian Gebhart (Stony Brook University): Germanizing Universities and Imperial Knowledge: Theodor Schiemann, Ostforschung, and the University of Dorpat at the End of the First World War.
Alexey Golubev (University of Toronto): Refugees in Power: Red Finns and the Making of Revolutionary Karelia.

Keynote Lecture

With an introduction by Peter Haslinger (Director, Herder Institute, Marburg)

Panel III
Chair: Konstantin Rometsch (Justus-Liebig-University, Gießen)
Seth Bernstein (Higher School of Economics, Moscow): Returnees or Refugees? The Reception of Soviet Repatriates in the USSR, 1945-1946.
Paul Vickers (Justus-Liebig-University, Gießen): Pioneers, Repatriants, Refugees: The Settlement of Poland’s Former German Territories in Socialist-era Polish Sociology

Panel IV
Chair: Anikó Boros (Humboldt University, Berlin)
Svetlana Boltovskaja (Herder Institute, Marburg): From Students to Refugees: African Immigration to the USSR and the post-Soviet Russia
Joanna Fomina (Academy of Sciences, Warsaw): Transnational Political Remittances, Knowledge Transmittance, Value-based Social Networks and Democratisation: Russian Political Migrants in Poland


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