

CEELBAS Network Project CN08UL-9 - Conference Report



The Changing Landscape of East-Central Europe since 1700 in Transnational Context (University of Oxford, 24-26 September 2009)

As the fourth international conference of the 'Forum of British, Czech and Slovak Historians' (and the second in the UK) this proved to be a highly stimulating event. It attracted a total of about 60 participants to the History Faculty at Oxford with 18 half-hour papers by historians or academic specialists from six countries. As was the practice with previous Forum conferences, a key aim was to specialise in East-Central Europe (especially current Czech and Slovak territory) but to use this as a base from which to explore comparative dimensions across the central European region and also outside it. With this in mind there were three keynote talks: by Verena Winiwarter (Klagenfurt), a pioneer in central European environmental history, who examined the historical impact of the Danube river basin; by Eva Semotanová (Prague), the leading expert on Czech historical geography, who discussed methodological approaches in Czech cartography; and by Christopher Smout (St Andrews: the Historiographer Royal of Scotland) who in a comparative discussion analysed the interaction of humanity with the Scottish peat bog ('a Valued and Despised Landscape') and suggested parallels with the central European region. Each of these keynote lectures set out a framework for geographical and methodological discussion which was consistently referred to during the proceedings. In addition a contribution by Martin Brown (Richmond) illuminated the political space or zones of mid-twentieth-century central Europe in which any modern landscape transformation had to operate.

Over three days, the seven conference panels assessed the changing landscape of East-Central Europe largely in chronological order from the eighteenth century. However, a broad variety of inter-disciplinary approaches were taken, emphasising to participants the wide source base for this subject and the advantages of varied methodologies for their own work. First there were literary approaches: Jozef Tancer (a German literary specialist from Bratislava) spoke about landscape perception in Hungary on the basis of eighteenth-century travelogues, while Rajendra Chitnis (Bristol) discussed how the Moravian landscape was portrayed through four twentieth century Czech novels. (The primary Czech literary specialist in the UK, Robert Pynsent (London), was unable to attend but will be contributing a chapter on Czech travel-writing in the 1940s to the final conference volume).

A further band of papers approached the subject very much from a historical-geographical perspective, exploring notions of geographical space but also particular types of landscape, whether rural or urban. Two papers presented approaches to the landscape of the city of Prague: Eva Chodějovská (Prague), a colleague of Semotanová, set out what could be learnt from early modern visual sources; while Claire Nolte (New York) told how Czech nationalists manipulated the city landscape in the decades before the First World War. Two further Czech historical geographers, Alice Velková (Prague) and Aleš Vyskočil (Brno) used Czech micro-studies to explore how social change could transform a rural or semi-rural region. While these papers eschewed a national approach, the formative modern nationalist struggle over much of the landscape was the focus of Nolte's paper and was explored further by

speakers who analysed how national tourism came to the regions of north Bohemia and southern Poland. Thus, Mark Cornwall (Southampton) took one mountain as a focus for the Czech-German national struggle, while Mateusz Hartwich (Frankfurt a.d. Oder) picked up similar themes from the other side of the Czech border. It was demonstrated how landscape could be appropriated nationally, led by nationalist activists in the regions but also manipulated as part of state modernization.

A different stance at the conference was to weigh the human economic impact on varieties of landscape as well as the environmental benefits or damage that resulted. Economic historians such as Sheilagh Ogilvie (Cambridge) were present to frame this discussion. In this vein Markus Cerman (Vienna) pursued the development of proto-industrialisation in early modern Bohemia; Robert Gray (London) discussed his PhD work on law and custom in the Hungarian landscape; and the renowned Slovak historian Roman Holec (Bratislava) gave a fine overview of how Hungary was industrialised in the nineteenth century. For the modern period, a number of speakers turned towards questions of environmental damage: L'udovit Hallon (Bratislava) enumerated the impact of industry in inter-war Slovakia, while two speakers specifically engaged with central European governments' environmental policies and the balance sheet of positive and negative developments. The celebrated environmental specialist Mikuláš Huba (Bratislava) spoke about landscape damage in Slovakia since the Second World War; while Christopher Pickvance (Canterbury) gave a contemporary assessment of environmental mobilization in Hungary. Through ill-health Adam Fagan (London) was unable to present his comparable ideas about environmental activism in the Czech lands, but it is envisaged that he will contribute to the edited book and serve as a useful balance to Huba's discussion. The conference also drew on the expertise of historians interested in climate change, notably Mark Levene (Southampton) who chaired a panel about contemporary concerns and a lively final discussion.

The topicality of the conference proceedings was very clear, evinced through the discussions and, for example, the presence at the conference of Michael Roberts (the new British ambassador to Slovakia). If those panels focusing on modern environmental concerns were most evidently topical, the wide variety of inter-disciplinary papers served to underline how the landscape has been and is a crucial dimension for human and national memories. It was therefore an ideal Forum comparative topic for the deeper understanding of how East-Central Europe has been shaped in the public imagination over three centuries. Those attending the conference, from a variety of disciplines, were introduced to a range of new approaches from which to develop their own research. Many also took advantage of the excellent opportunities in Oxford for academic networking with a view to new research collaborations, and specifically with this mind the conference organizers invited Professor Ogilvie and the American historian Pieter Judson (Swarthmore) who both have strong international links. The fourth Forum conference has therefore amply fulfilled its expectations. In particular perhaps, after almost ten years of existence, the Forum is braced to begin a new period of cooperation between British, Czech and Slovak historians, and to this the Oxford conference has demonstrably contributed.

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