



Conference Summary: The Future of Central and East European Studies in the Light of Russia's War of Aggression Against Ukraine

Russia's present war of aggression against Ukraine has drawn the world's attention once more to Central and Eastern Europe, and to the complex political realities and histories of the peoples that live there. For scholars of the region this would seem an occasion to raise important questions about how it has been understood and characterized within scholarly discourses worldwide, as well as within the shifting tectonics of European and global geopolitics. In October 2024 the Pilecki Institute held a three-day international conference in partnership with the Davis Center at Harvard University, the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw, the Centre for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin, the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University, and the Lithuanian Institute of History. The aim of the conference "The Future of Central and East European Studies in the Light of Russia's War of Aggression Against Ukraine" was to provide a forum for debate over the past, present and potential future of research and scholarship of this region. A central goal was to promote an understanding of the region worldwide that moves away from the Russian-centric view which has long affected scholarly approaches.

The conference brought together prominent specialists from across the region, Europe, and North America. Topics discussed ranged from geopolitics and economics, international law and war crimes, historiography, memory studies, to cultural studies and others. Punctuating the three days of panel sessions were keynote addresses given by Igor Lukes of Boston University, Marek Cichoński of the Collegium Civitas in Warsaw, Mark Kramer of the Davis Center at Harvard University, Undersecretary of State at the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education and professor at the University of Warsaw Andrzej Szeptycki, and Tetiana Portnova of the University of Potsdam. While important panels and keynote addresses were focused directly on scholarly and historiographical concerns, it was clear from the outset that it is not possible to separate these

issues from wider political, legal, and economic dynamics of a more global nature. In his keynote address, Mark Kramer discussed the availability of archival sources concerning Eastern and Central Europe, Russia in particular, highlighting the fundamental role such access plays in academic research. While noting the counter-intuitive fact that Russian archives had become more, not less, open as Putin's regime became more autocratic, he underlined that the present war has shut the door firmly on archival research in Russia for the foreseeable future. To talk about Central and East European Studies even as a purely academic field thus necessarily implicates wider political issues, and academic interests are frequently influenced, and at times distorted, by political interests. As Tetiana Portnova pointed out in her keynote address, the political crisis brought about by the war has resulted in increased visibility and support for Ukrainian academics in Western universities, but whether such interest lasts beyond the political situation itself remains to be seen. Raising the profile of Central and Eastern Europe as an autonomous region within global academic institutions – a vitally important goal for all those attending the conference – is clearly linked to realizing and understanding its strategic importance within a European and global context.

Speaking of Central and Eastern Europe, or East-Central Europe, or simply Central Europe as a single region in itself raises important questions, and the names themselves can be misleading. In his address, Marek Cichocki referred to Central Europe as a “moveable region,” one that has shifted over time giving rise to divergent geopolitical perspectives. Caught between the Oder and the Don, it is tempting to see Central Europe as a ‘Bloodlands,’ following Timothy Snyder's concept – territories caught between and overrun by the territorial ambitions of powerful neighbors. But there is also a danger in allowing the region to be understood solely in terms of domination by great powers, and labels such as ‘Eastern Europe’ can, as Andrzej Szeptycki noted, be simply a way of mentally attaching former Warsaw-bloc states to the Russian and Soviet East (hence his own preference for ‘Central Europe’). Similarly, to see the current situation as a ‘New Cold War’ between an authoritarian East and a liberal-democratic West risks, as Cichocki argued, treating Central Europe as no more than an area of great systemic divisions and conflicts over which the nations therein may have little or no influence and may even be sacrificed in the name of international stability.

Any study of Central and Eastern Europe must view it as a region of independent and autonomous states with their own distinct histories and cultures. Yet these cannot be discussed without also accounting for the role of imperialism in the region. This was the topic of a discussion panel led by Andrzej Nowak and featuring Marek Kornat, both of the Institute of History at the Polish Academy of Science, Darius Staliūnas of the Lithuanian Institute of History, and Jan Holzer of Masaryk University in Brno. What is troubling in Western historiography, as

noted by all three panelists, has been the tendency to understate or indeed exclude the concept of imperialism in analyses of the Soviet Union's development and its relation to Central Europe, instead focusing on authoritarianism as a purely internal problem. The persistent willingness of Western observers, academics and policy-makers to ignore the role of imperialist expansionism in Soviet history reflects Russo-centric biases within Western scholarship, a problem highlighted throughout the conference. One panel, organized by Bartłomiej Krzysztań of the Institute of Political Studies of PAN, was devoted to questions of such examples of epistemic violence in the former imperial Russian and Soviet space, with attention given to the struggles by twentieth-century Polish émigré Sovietologists to stress the role of imperialism connecting Tsarist Russia with the Soviet Union. One result from the collapse of the Soviet Union and especially following Russia's aggression against Ukraine from 2014 on, is that – as Korнат, Staliūnas, and Holzer all noted – imperialism is finally being reintroduced into discussions of authoritarian and non-democratic regimes, especially in terms of Russia with its Soviet and imperialist past.

Post-colonial studies in connection with imperialism is an approach that might be applied to the post-imperial spaces of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine. Portnova in her address noted that post-colonialism is perhaps the most accessible metaphor for a Western audience to understand the situation of Ukraine and to combat the near-invisibility of the Ukrainian subject in Cultural and Slavic Studies. A post-colonial perspective can, as she argued, help to de-emphasize the nation state as the primary mode for understanding the region (where Central European nations disappear next to their more powerful neighbors) and emphasize instead transnational, regional and global developments. Kramer too stressed that the notion of decolonization can be useful as a way of understanding the Soviet Union as a whole, studying the particular histories, cultures, and societies of Ukraine and other former Soviet republics and satellites without ignoring Moscow's enormous impact on these. The post-colonial perspective can also give Eastern Europe a way to appeal to the Global South for understanding and support, as Marek Jan Wasiński pointed out. He warned, however, that a post-colonial identity for Ukraine might ultimately appear hypocritical to those in the Global South, as in the end it is Ukraine's goal to join the 'Western Empire' of the EU and NATO.

The lack of support in the Global South for establishing an international tribunal in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine exemplifies the broader challenges facing the prosecution of international crimes within the complex historical context of Central-Eastern Europe. "History & Law – A Rocky Relationship" was the topic of the discussion panel led by Patrycja Grzebyk in which Wasiński took part along with Anton Weiss-Wendt, Agnieszka Bieńczyk-Missala, and Aldo Zammit Borda. The Soviet Union's history of evading responsibility for war crimes during the Second World War and in the process of Sovietization of Eastern Europe has left

a legacy of systemic patterns of atrocities against civilians that has been continued by Russia since and continues now in its war against Ukraine, as Bieńczyk-Missala discussed. The Soviet Union's leading position after the war, for example during the Nuremberg Trials and – as Weiss-Wendt discussed – in the drafting of the Genocide Convention, allowed it to influence the pursuit of international legal principles following its own goals, and has certainly added to Russia's continuing sense of impunity, as well as its standing in the Global South. Putin has certainly been adept at warping Soviet history to present a blameless, even victimized image. But then one of the important roles of international tribunals, as Zammit Borda discussed, is surely to correct such historical narratives through the painstaking process of fact-finding and verification necessitated by unbiased legal procedure. In this way perhaps legal narratives can be a corrective to the mistakes and manipulations of historical and political discourse.

Historical and political narratives are, as many presentations in this conference have shown, deeply intertwined, and this has presented many challenges to promoting a more accurate and unbiased understanding of this region. Even as fundamental a source of historical knowledge as school curricula can be subject to this dynamic, as was discussed at length in a panel on Western European perspectives on the history of Ukraine in school history textbooks organized by Igor Kąkolewski of the Centre for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin. Many other panels touched similarly on historical narratives as well as memory studies, another vital subject in the shaping of national and transnational discourses. Yet while much rests on historical understanding to shape political policy, it is important to recognize the impact of ongoing change. There is of course a great deal of discussion of new media technologies and their impact on politics and on the war, a subject that was touched on in many presentations, as well as many new and troubling methods and associated crimes in the conduct of the current conflict. But as Igor Lukes stressed in his opening keynote address, there are positive aspects to the geopolitical changes taking place in the 21st century. Attitudes in the West are in fact changing, he pointed out, shifting from a paradigm of territorial sovereignty to informational sovereignty, and in some ways it is Putin and Russia that remain mired in outdated and false historical and political narratives while Central and Eastern Europe may have a chance to escape their pasts as dominated and colonized territories. For Central and East European Studies it is to be hoped that a transnational perspective, replacing the struggles of nations against great powers and empires, will bring a more nuanced and unbiased picture of the region and its history to scholarship and to political policy worldwide in the future.

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