

## Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film and Culture

Beitrag vom: 27.07.2018

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*Facing the East in the West* is a collection of twenty-nine short essays devoted to various perceptions of the widely defined "East" in Britain. Most papers in this volume deal with contemporary sources and representations, while only a few of them go back in time to look at historical perceptions (usually not older than the late nineteenth century). As a result, despite occasional glimpses into the past, *Facing the East in the West* may be considered a significant contribution to an understanding of the ways in which British contemporary culture perceives the East. Or, taking into account the year of publication, the ways in which British culture perceived the East in the years that followed the accession to the European Union of a number of post-communist states.

The book is divided into seven parts, each presenting chapters discussing different themes of East-West interactions. The first part ("East and West: Mirrorings") concentrates on an issue mentioned by Barbara Korte in her introductory essay. As she argues, "the East (...) is a space not only to be re-discovered, but also a mirror-space that helps the West to complement and destabilise its conceptions about itself, its stereotypes about the East, and its ideas about Europe and the European cultural heritage" (p. 4). The discussion of these mirror images begins with an inspiring chapter by Elisabeth Cheuré ("Infinite Mirrorings: Russia and Eastern Europe as the West's 'Other'"). The unique character of Russia *vis-à-vis* the West is linked not only to the famous quote by Tyutchev [1], but also to the fact that it is "simultaneously seeking a connection with and an opposition to the West" (p. 32). Effectively, it is almost impossible to tell how far from reality the image of Russia in the West is. This becomes even more complicated if we take into consideration that Western knowledge of Russia is usually based on accounts, writings and information provided by Russians themselves. As Cheuré notes, the question "whether we are dealing with a Russian self-image or a play on the Western gaze on Russia remains unanswered" (p. 33).

Christiane Bimberg discusses similar differences in her analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* ("A glimpse behind the scenes', 'trying to capture the very soul of things Russian': Literary Representations of Intercultural East-West Encounters in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*"). In it, "the Russian revolutionary aristocrats are [presented as] perverted, diminutive mock-heroic versions of their great counterparts of the

French Enlightenment and the French Revolution" (p. 53). In his juxtaposition of West and East, Conrad (a Central Eastern European himself) manages to avoid oversimplifications in his representation of both sides.

The essays presented in the part "Journeys, Encounters, Cultural Translations" take a closer look at the ways in which British writers (from Maurice Baring to Ken Smith) perceive Eastern Europe and how they represent it in their works. In a rather brief, but very interesting chapter on Maurice Baring's *What I Saw in Russia* ("To Russia with Love: Maurice Baring (1875-1945)"), Elmar Schenkel points out that the British author was faced with the same predicaments as everyone else writing about and trying to understand Russia. Understanding the "Russian soul" as well as the dichotomies in the behaviour of individual Russians (who could be both fervently religious and atheistic at the same time) and Russia as a country were among the key issues every Western writer had to face. As "his book and all of his work about Russia derives from a certain sympathy between himself and the Russians" (p. 87), Baring was capable of looking beyond Western stereotypes of the East. The same can be said about Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Stephen Spender and John Lehmann, the authors discussed in Dirk Wiemann's essay ("A Russian Romance: 1930s British Writers as Wishful Participants in the Soviet Revolution"). However, the only element linking those authors are their attempts to understand Russia and to avoid stereotypes in their presentation of it. Baring, writing in the early twentieth century, was concerned with individual Russians and their lives. The others, watching the developments in the 1930s from far-away Britain, took an interest in the political and economic importance of those changes, whilst almost completely ignoring the impact they had on millions of people in Russia.

In this context, Sissy Helff's "From Euphoria to Disillusionment: Representations of Communism and the Soviet Union in Arthur Koestler's *The Invisible Writing*" offers a particularly insightful glimpse into perceptions of the totalitarian East. The book discussed in this chapter presented Koestler's physical journey through the Soviet Union in the 1930s and his "inner journey, a transformation from a devoted communist to a disenchanted humanist" (p. 112). Writing in the Cold War context, the author of *The Invisible Writing* "can no longer relate to his behavioural patterns without criticising his former action" (p. 118). Similarly to other western intellectuals of his time, Koestler became fascinated by communist ideology and joined the Comintern in 1931, but left the organisation seven years later and expressed his disappointment with communism in *The Invisible Writing*. This book became, therefore, a means to deal with Koestler's "mistakes" of his youth.

The part "Stereotypes: Staying Power and Subversion" holds a number of essays looking at the ways in which the stereotypical East is represented in British culture. Here we can find chapters discussing some of the most popular British works, such as the *Harry Potter* series (Hochbruck, Feiten and Tiedman's "'Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaand Krum!': Joanne K. Rowling's 'Eastern' Europe") or the Bond Series ("'The Russians could no longer be the heavies': *From Russia with Love* and the Cold War in the Bond Series" by Jonas Takors). Both articles discuss how a stereotypical representation of the East found its way into both series, sometimes evolving, like in the Bond movies, into something different than the author had originally intended. Instead of a typical Cold War antagonism between the East and the West as presented in Fleming's novels, the adaptation of *From Russia with Love* points out that international terrorism is something much more dangerous. The movie, created ten years after the publication of the novel, came into being in a completely different political milieu, leading to significant changes in the initially anti-Soviet tone of the story. In "A Troubled Union: Representations of Eastern

Europe in Nineteenth-Century Irish Protestant Literature", Michael McAteer offers an interesting argument by suggesting that "the imagining of Eastern Europe in late-nineteenth century British literature [was] a projection of anxieties deriving in part from the Irish Question within the Union" (p. 207). His analysis of Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, Stoker's *Dracula* and Shaw's *Arms and the Man* and how those authors presented Eastern Europe remains, however, slightly unconvincing. The essay fails to link the contemporary situation in Ireland with the way in which Irish authors portrayed the East, becoming, instead, an interesting analysis of various themes from the books themselves only loosely connected with the main topic of this part of the volume.

A separate part of the book is devoted to Poland. In "Polish Identities in Perspective: Accession – Integration – Perception" we find three essays dealing with the representation of Polish migrants ("Can the Polish Migrant Speak? The Representation of 'Subaltern' Polish Migrants in Film, Literature and Music from Britain and Poland" by Joanna Rostek and Dirk Uffermann and "Images of Poles and Poland in *The Guardian*, 2003-2005" by Przemysław Wilk) as well as with the changing experience of Polish migrants in Britain over the years (Marie-Luise Egbert's "'Old Poles' and 'New Blacks': The Polish Immigrant Experience in Britain"). The first two chapters remain sketchy, but the last one offers a comprehensive historical overview serving as a backdrop to a detailed analysis of *The Black Madonna of Derby* by Joanna Czechowska. It is also the only text in this volume that deals with the subject of post-war Polish migration to Britain. In the context of the significance of this and the more recent wave of Polish (economic) emigration, the scarcity of chapters discussing this subject is rather striking.

The last section of this volume ("(Re-)Visiting Eastern Spaces in Contemporary British Fiction") consists of six chapters, each discussing different works of contemporary British writers. Two papers presented here are particularly interesting. Corina Crişu's "British Geographies in the Eastern European Mind: Rose Tremain's *The Road Home*" takes a closer look at the subject of transnational identities and the "complicated relationship between the immigrant's identity and the old/new place" (p. 366). She defines the main character of Tremain's novel not simply as an immigrant, but as "a *homo viator* in search for human values" (p. 367). Similar issues are discussed in Claudia Duppé's essay "Tourist in Her Native Country: Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name*", in which she extends the discourse on identity by taking a look at the role of memory and history in migrants' tales.

Like many collections of essays, *Facing the East in the West* is not very consistent when it comes to the quality of particular chapters. There are many which are either too short or unfinished, lacking clear arguments and limiting themselves to a simple presentation of certain literary works. This is particularly striking when we compare articles devoted to older works (dating back to the nineteenth or early twentieth century) to those discussing contemporary British fiction or film. With only a few exceptions (i.e. the highly engaging text on the *Harry Potter* series), the former are much more readable and offer much better arguments than the latter. One can only wonder whether, on the eve of Brexit, it is time for yet another collection of essays looking at the ways in which the British perception of the East changed over recent years, perhaps including more historical and comparative approaches than the essays presented in this volume.

[1] 'Russia is a thing of which / the intellect cannot conceive. / Hers is no common yardstick / You measure her uniquely: / in Russia you can believe!' (p. 34)



**Zitierweise:**

Dr. Milosz K. Cybowski: Rezension zu: Barbara Korte; Eva U. Pirker; Sissy Helff (eds.): Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film and Culture , 2010, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/1950#r7133>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/1950?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=7133>