

Interdisciplinary Conference: (De-)constructing Central Europe: From Mitteleuropa to Visions of a Common Europe, 1918–2018

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Location: Collegium Polonicum, Ślubice and the European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder)

Hosted by: Center for Interdisciplinary Polish Studies; Szczecin University; Willy Brandt Center in Wrocław

Conference e-mail: zip-conference@europa-uni.de

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This conference aims at analyzing a century of academic output stemming from both East and West regarding Central Europe, asserting that the humanities offer a unique reflection of Central European

relations over the past 100 years.

After the end of World War I and the collapse of the great empires, new nation-states became the target of border revisionism across the board. While wars were sometimes fought between countries, authorities turned to academics in the belief that *academics was a continuation of politics by other means*. Authorities in all countries attempted to expand their territory, basing their claims on history. Divergent ideas of "federation," and concepts such as "Mitteleuropa," "Deutscher Osten," "Międzymorze," "Koncepcja Federacyjna," "Čechoslovakismus," or "Nagy-Magyarország" (in Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, respectively) dominated academic discourses in the interwar period, as ethnographers and linguists set out to research the "new" peoples, languages, and states of Central Europe. In the lead up to World War II, institutions like the Publikationsstelle Berlin-Dahlem funded ideologically-driven studies to prove "scientific" conclusions about the superiority of Germans and their culture. Starting in the 1920s, government-funded institutions like the Instytut Polski were founded in foreign countries to counter such German *Ostforschung*. The latter had its golden era under the Nazi regime, as scholars were enrolled to justify Hitler's policy of "blood and soil" and the infamous *Generalplan Ost*. At the same time, the Allied powers also referenced academic articles and intellectuals, who in turn thought that the only way to preserve a post-War peace would be to ethnically cleanse the region of Germans.

As the very term "think tanks" suggests, scholars were utilized to legitimize political goals after 1945. First used in the 1950s to describe a center of higher learning on the West Coast of the United States, think tanks flourished in the age of the Cold War. The West Institute in Poznań was but one of many in the Soviet bloc claiming an unbroken tradition of German revanchism from the Middle Ages to the present. In turn, institutes such as the Herder Institute in West Germany supported claims to territories that had been ceded to the East. Such state-run programs fed the industrial-military complex during the Cold War, but also led to greater cooperation between academics. With the policy of *détente* in the 1970s, scholars increasingly came into contact with counterparts on the opposing side of the Iron Curtain. Intellectuals began to revive discussions about Central Europe, this time arguing that the region was fundamentally linked to the West. In the age of the EU, journals like *Przegląd Zachodni*—which has focused on the subject "Poland-Germany-Europe" for the past decade—are symbols of this transition from dualistic, combative research to regional studies focused in a global context.

We argue that contemporary debates about history, language, and identity have hardly been overcome. Controversies about the House of Terror in Budapest, the World War II Museum in Gdańsk, the "Holocaust Law," or recent debates about reparations or minority rights show that there appears to be no end in sight for politically-charged academia. This conference intends to explore the complicated history of scholarly output between politics and academics over the past century.

This conference will invite 20 advanced and up-and-coming scholars from around the world to Frankfurt Oder and Słubice to discuss original research on the topic of "(de-)constructing Central Europe."

It is unique in numerous ways. First, since most research has been done in the field of history, we encourage scholars in all core disciplines of the humanities to participate in this international conference. We envision interdisciplinary panels which focus on (but are not limited to) sociology, history, anthropology, linguistics, literary studies, urban studies, political science, and musicology. Secondly, we particularly invite scholars from or who work on the states of Central Europe broadly defined. That is in the realization that little or no work has been published in English on the "smaller" countries of Central Europe. Finally, it is unique in its focus on three particular clusters of research.

First, we would like to have panels which focus on individual *actors* who were crucial to the (de-)construction of Central Europe. While much has been written on individuals such as Milan Kundera or Marion Dönhoff, much less attention has been given to academics such as Hanuš Kuffner or others who were equally as influential in the field of *Ostforschung* or its respective counterpart in the East. Secondly, it is our intention to highlight *institutions and networks* which supported research of academics. Here, we focus our attention on centers of higher education and think tanks which frequently guided politics through their publications. Finally, we look at the particular *discourses* and how they evolved over time. Concepts like "Central Europe" had drastically different meanings depending on who was using them and when: on the one hand, they legitimized revisionist calls for a change in the world order; on the other, they tried to create bridges between East and West so as to defuse political conflicts in the realm of academia.

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