CfP: After Memory: Conflicting Claims to World War Two in Contemporary Eastern European Literatures

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Language: English

Call for Papers

2015 marks the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. The question as to how we ought to and even how we are able to think about this event are just as relevant today as ever. Representational practices and commemorative rituals fluctuate throughout history, and in the last few decades we have seen fundamental shifts in how World War II is dealt with. The reasons behind such shifts are diverse. In particular, the current "post-memorial" constitution of a kind of commemoration, which no longer primarily depends on the personal memories of historical eyewitnesses (Marianne Hirsch),[1] is bringing with it new approaches to the topic. Post-memorial, aesthetic products no longer have the same degree of involvement that had previously defined the contributions of eyewitnesses when it came to conveying norms based on content and ethics. Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglorious Bastards*, which brings the aesthetics of the splatter film to the German hinterland, Jonathan Littell's novel *Les Bienveillantes*, which gives imaginary form to German SS officers' fantasies of violence, and Stefan Twardoch's novel *Morfina*, in which a Polish fighter in the underground resistance gets to share in the intoxicating thrill of power enjoyed by the German "master race," are all examples of post-memorial war stories that reinvent the past and by doing so render it more appealing in terms of affect and the imaginary of the present.

In Eastern Europe, this radical, new adjustment of perspectives on the Second World War in the arts and belletristic literature in particular goes hand in hand with literature's loss of standing as a central medium of communication, a status it held well into the 1990s in the societies of this region, which were very much centered on literature.

This state of affairs has to be considered against the backdrop of the surge in cultural and artistic thought that took place in Eastern European countries after the breakup of the Warsaw Pact, which has taken on enormous relevance in light of current controversies that amount to something like a "war of remembrance." These conflicting claims to an authoritative memory of World War II evoke the Soviets' role in Eastern Europe as well as national resistance and emancipation movements, some of which worked closely with German National Socialists.[2] These often irreconcilable positions have become even more entrenched with the crisis in Ukraine, where both Russians and Ukrainians constantly instrumentalize the pathos formulas of World War II that were used in warfare conflicts and in demarcating identity politics.

The recent boom in historical-political debates can be traced back to the aftereffects caused by the change in systems in former state socialist countries, for this change brought with it the end of a politics of remembrance and history regulated by the state, which had formerly involved the victory against Nazi Germany as the central legitimizing moment behind the Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. With the fall of the Soviet system memories and narratives of the past that were long forbidden, repressed and marginalized have resurfaced in the last few decades. They have subsequently been appropriated in different historical-political ways as part of the newly claimed, or reclaimed, independence of certain nation-states. In reassessing the treatment of the Second World War and the Holocaust, one phase of the prescribed politics of memorialization and partial forgetting necessarily loses its hold in Eastern European countries (Marszałek, Molisak).[3]

The conference takes this situation as its point of departure, a situation characterized by a double sense of afterwardsness on the one hand, with regard to the dwindling numbers of historical eyewitnesses and, on the other hand, concerning the suspension of the monopoly on how history is interpreted and given meaning. From here we take a comparatist perspective and inquire into how the engagement with World War II has taken shape in recent years in East-European literature. The conflicting claims to these events, one might argue, are not mirrored in the literature of Eastern Europe as one-dimensional representations of reality according to cultural politics, but instead they are dealt with in complex and diverse ways as part of a reflection on the post-socialist and post-memorial configurations in a given region. The conference proposes analyzing and discussing them under the following four aspects:

1. Memory theory and contemporary literature: With theoretical concerns in mind, we ask how we might theorize the linkages between the "post-socialist" situation and a "post-memorial" society? Comparative research on collective memory as it relates to post-socialist cultures in Eastern Europe has been confronted with a rather paradoxical image: As Catherine Merridale has shown in the case of Russia, the decades spent manipulating memories about World War II and keeping silent about the Gulag apparently did not have any "traumatic" consequences for "communicative memory."[4] In spite of the intense academic and journalistic treatment of the socialist historical policy of partial forgetting, the social shock that was experienced after the post-socialist breakup seems to have nevertheless promoted an almost obsessive return to ritualized modes of affect and myths about history that continue to be passed on.[5] Even Pierre Nora's diagnosis that a nation-state's "collective memory" in the late-modern societies of the present tends towards diversification through an increase in fragmented and privatized "sites of remembrance" seems to only capture part of the issue, especially given the newfound establishment of national and religious allegiances in Europe's East. And yet, how does the generation of authors born after the fact deal with the war's legacy and its culture of affect? Can their poetics be described as a "post-socialist" processing of "warped memories" (Alexander Etkind)? Or are they better understood as post-memorial fictions contributing to a reinvention and reappropriation of the personal narrative, a trend that can be observed elsewhere in European literature?

2. Media of affect and contemporary literature: Belletristic literature about the Second World War was particularly important during the socialist era both in terms of providing representations of the war that differed from the official heroic narratives and as part of the *samizdat*, the "second circulation" (*Drugi obieg*), and the circulation of literary works about taboo topics among those living in exile. The central role of literature as a vehicle for ideas has, however, suffered losses over the last few decades. A new culture of remembrance has established itself which is largely dominated by the performative arts and foremost by film and television shows. The internet and its specific forms of media have also proved highly significant in this context, especially as a site for the "digital memory wars" (Ellen Rutten), where socio-political conflicts are played out. In contrast to digital media and its instantaneous transmission of audiovisual content, literature appears as a rather slow and distanced medium that must use writing to mediate emotions and produce figures of the imagination. In light of this opposition and with an eye on similar developments in the West, questions arise concerning the implications behind literature's loss of standing as a central

mode of communication and authors' reactions to the competition between media. Do they attempt to imitate the immersive potential of other media through literary means? Or, conversely, do authors try to emphasize a poetics of affect that is genuinely literal or rather literary? What literary genres and forms have become more predominant as a consequence of the new opportunities made possible by digital publishing and a globalized book market?

3. Post-socialist narratives and contemporary literature: Socialist literary traditions as well as the works produced in the literary underground and in exile have left behind an immense cultural archive full of figures, themes, and narratives related to World War II. From a comparative perspective, this section invites historical and systematic inquiries into how contemporary literary traditions are dealing with this legacy. In the first decade of the post-socialist era, revisions of war stories were predominantly characterized by post-modern and mythopoetic styles that were both playful and mystical. Given the fundamental shifts in the parameters of literary history as observed in the literatures of the region, how did the situation change shape? What role do the paradigms of "new realism" and "new sincerity" play in these contexts? And what do we make of the rived traditions of the historical novel and pseudo-documentary narration or the boom in fantastic literature and tales of anti-utopian worlds? How are motives and narratives being adapted and rewritten? And what new forms of narration and literary devices can we identify?

4. History politics, globalized memory and contemporary literature: To be sure, literature was not just strongly influenced by the ideology of Cold War narratives and the aesthetic doctrines of official cultural policies in socialist states. Today literature has to assert itself worldwide in a broad field of globalized remembrance practices, consumer culture, and laws governing the neoliberal market. At the same time, literature is active in fields including the political history of nation-states, the discourse on local identity, and transnational memorialization practices—developments which have led to an increasing politization of authors and not just those living in Russia. How do literary texts intervene in this local and global setting when it comes to World War II? What kinds of socio-political conflicts, mourning practices, and fantasies of violence are implicated when reflecting back on the war? And how are they related to practices involved in establishing identities? Do texts seem to be developing more towards the purpose of globalized entertainment or towards local discourses on identity? Are we witnessing the dissolution of memorial culture in Eastern Europe, whose "post-memorial"

conflicting claims regarding World War II also signal an end to the shared and specifically "post-socialist" situation in Eastern Europe?

We encourage proposals for papers from the fields of literary studies, cultural studies, and East European area studies. The conference will be held at the ZfL, Berlin from 6-8 November 2015. Depending on conference funding, we may be able to cover costs for travel and accommodation. The conference language will be English. A publication of the conference papers is planned. Please submit an abstract of no more than 300 words together with a short CV by 28 February 2015 to Matthias Schwartz (schwartz@zfl-berlin.org).

[1] Marianne Hirsch: The Generation of Postmemory, in: *Poetics Today* 29:1 (2008), pp. 103-128.
[2] See Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind, and Julie Fedor (eds.): *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe,* New York 2013.
[3] See Magdalena Marszałek and Alina Molisak (eds.): *Nach dem Vergessen. Rekurse auf den Holocaust in Ostmitteleuropa nach 1989,* Berlin 2010.
[4] Catherine Merridale: The Collective Mind. Trauma and Shell-Shock in Twentieth-Century Russia, in: *Journal of Contemporary History,* 35:1 (2000), pp. 39-55.
[5] See Serguei Oushakine: Remembering in Public. On the Affective Management of History, in: *Ab Imperio* 1 (2013), pp. 269-302.