

Best practice in the Representation of History and Remembrance: Applied history in the German-Polish Borderland

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Abstract

This essay looks at an approach to dealing with the past in a divided society on the German-Polish border. It presents the work of the Institute for Applied History which evolved some years ago as an experiment representing not an academic institute, but an association of mainly cultural scientists developing different ways of dealing with the past in a very specific place: the German-Polish borderland. Although the Second World War ended more than 60 years ago, the consequences of the specific developments along the Oder-Neiße rivers are still of relevance to the local population and represent an interesting field of scientific analysis and civic action. Therefore, this essay intends to assess the role that “Applied History” can play in contemporary reconciliation and identity formation processes in the post-war societies on the German-Polish border.

Essay

This essay looks at an approach to dealing with the past in a divided society on the German-Polish border. It presents the work of the Institute for Applied History which evolved some years ago as an experiment representing not an academic institute, but an association of mainly cultural scientists developing different ways of dealing with the past in a very specific place: the German-Polish borderland. Why is that place specific? Because it has been a borderland only for some sixty years. Therefore, this essay intends to assess the role that a civic initiative with an academic background plays in contemporary reconciliation and identity formation processes in post-war societies on the German-Polish border. Although the Second World War ended more than 60 years ago, the consequences of the specific developments along the Oder-Neiße rivers are still of relevance to the local population and represent an interesting field of scientific analysis and civic action. It is needless to stress that post-conflict reconciliation is a long-term process extending across generations.

The following reflections are divided into three parts: The first will introduce the background from which the Institute for Applied History evolved. The second part will give an example of how the institute works with the collective memory of divided societies. The third part will conclude by stressing the key-factors of the work on the representation of history and remembrance on the German-Polish border.

Trial and error

The Institute for Applied History is located in the East German town of Frankfurt, on the river Oder, approximately 80 km to the East of Berlin. I am that precise, as the origins of the Institute are closely related to the place where it emerged. The specific place is of importance for the institute’s development and self-conception. The river Oder, together with the Neiße river, mark the German-Polish border since the end of World War Two. Before that war, which the Germans started, the Oder flowed through the town of Frankfurt with one suburb lying to the East of the river. The maps of

Poland and Germany were significantly redrawn after the Second World War, both losing territory in the East. Poland significantly moved West, now bordering on the river Oder. Thus, after the war, which the Germans lost, that suburb of Frankfurt on the other riverside became a proper Polish city named Słubice. A completely new Polish city had to be created on the territory of a German suburb including a new population, a new administration, a new infrastructure independent from the former main town and much more... Poles from the lost Polish Eastern Territories (like the area around the former Polish city Lwów, since about 1945 the Ukrainian town Lviv) were settled in this former German suburb of Frankfurt (Oder). Frankfurt became a border town and a reception camp for German expellees from the lost German Eastern Territories was established there right after the war. Frankfurt was almost completely burned down by the Soviet Army passing through it in spring 1945. As its population had been evacuated before the Soviets arrived, the number of casualties remained low. Yet, a new socialist border town had to be erected requiring people to believe in this new ideology which hence settled Frankfurt even as parts of its former population and the aforementioned expellees that still hoped to return east.

Therefore, on both sides of the river, the year 1945 not only marked a new beginning after an atrocious war, but also meant the construction of two completely new societies. Collective narratives had to be found to give the local population an identity.

This was attempted, yet another shift in world history shook up these parallel processes on either side of the river Oder entirely: the breakdown of the communist bloc. The reunification of Germany and, just over a decade later, the accession of Poland to the European Union challenged the fragile identities on both river banks. A new narrative evolved: the vision of a European twin town located on both banks of the Oder. Wasn't it time to foster a common future society based on Polish and German perceptions as a specific asset of this place and not neglecting the divided developments during the communist times?

Young graduates of cultural studies at the so called European University Viadrina, since the early nineties located in Frankfurt (Oder), were struck by these unsettled societies. This is how the Institute for Applied History evolved. Polish and German students were driven by a wide range of questions arising from studying and living there, in Frankfurt and Słubice. Questions such as: Why Frankfurt promotes itself at once as "Kleist-Stadt" (after the German writer Heinrich von Kleist) and as "Messestadt" (City of trade fairs), as "Solarstadt" (Solar City) and of course as "Universitätsstadt" (University City)? Of course, the attributes refer either to local history or to local commerce. Needless to say that the notion "identity" is multiple per se and under constant change. But what does this variety of simultaneous identities of a 61,000 inhabitant town tell us? How come the town of Słubice, barely 60 years old, is part of the "Hanseatic League"? What do the Poles who live there know about the German heritage of Słubice and what do the Germans living so near to Poland know about their neighbour? And after all, why do most of them know that little?

The first attempt of the students was to organize bicultural events to attract one side to the other side of the border. Get people together. Polish literature was translated and presented in Frankfurt, German theatre events were realised in Słubice, a film festival organised on both riversides presented the established Polish film director Andrzej Wajda. But the more German and Polish students engaged in cultural events, the more they realised that the reality in both towns was cemented within clear national and institutional boundaries. It became obvious that there would be no interest in the other if

the other was in no way of any concern for the everyday life of the average local people. The conclusions were: intercultural events attract only a rather overseeable group of people that is already interested in the other, they do not reach to the broad public of both towns. What's more, intercultural events rarely raise awareness of the other beyond the artistic qualities of the "show" itself. The entertaining effect dominates.

That's why another way of dealing with this divided society on the river Oder had to be found. The students consequently turned from dealing with art and culture to strongly involving history in their projects. The Institute for Applied History started to focus on dealing with the difficult German-Polish history of the 20th century in a creative, transnational and interdisciplinary manner. Since then, educational and cultural projects have been created which aimed at investigating together the histories on both sides of the river. The themes flight, expulsion, trauma, lost and new beginning were crucial topics for both societies on the Oder and thus pivotal for the projects involving the local population as well as interested students of the Cultural Sciences. By talking to citizens of both towns, one could easily find people who did not voluntarily come to Frankfurt and one could find a lot more in Słubice. In its projects the Institute inquired: What are the stories of these people? What does this history mean for their perception of the other on the other side of the river? And in consequence: Is there a base for a common history that does not divide but unifies the different perspectives? Finally, what is the future of the region centred on the river, as the river's meaning as a border loses more and more weight?

Applied History

At the European University Viadrina, the activists of the Institute designed seminars on the cultural history of the region with a special focus on travelling in the region and experiencing its heritage by including conversations with representatives of local NGOs, of the local administration and witnesses of the history of resettling the former German territories. Out of these seminars, several academic papers evolved as well as public history projects. One project for example was a series of smaller public events titled "Terra Transoderana". The title picks up a medieval term and redefines it as the territory on both sides of the river Oder; while defining the river as its pivotal point and not as its dividing line. German and Polish witnesses of history spoke in public about their post-war arrival in Frankfurt and Słubice. Some told about how Frankfurt evolved under socialist rule, again others narrated how Słubice was propagated as a Polish city. Documentary films, literature and old photographs were used to illustrate these stories in public events which were simultaneously translated into Polish and German. They involved the local population and cultural institutions, local media and interested academics of the Viadrina. Another result of the initial seminar on the "Terra Transoderana" is the book "Almanach Terra Transoderana" (Terra, 2008). In it, Polish and German historians and students present new approaches to a forgotten and marginalized region east of the river Oder.

Meanwhile, seminars include training elements on intercultural learning and guidance through "historically mine-ridden" territory. And here, another idea emerged: Why not offer intercultural experience, knowledge of the historical and actual German-Polish relations and proficiency in speaking Polish and German to people that do not possess these assets? The service "HeimatReise" was established and is today an independent travel agency (www.heimatreise.eu). The service addresses people, mostly Germans, wanting to individually retrace their roots in Poland, in the former East-German territories. These people are not organised in political refugee organisations and wish to experience a trip into their families' pasts independent of any organisation, privately, with an

individual mediator. HeimatReise offers translation, research, accompaniment, and – in particular – mediation between the German past and the Polish present of the visited places. The service pursues a purely individual approach to deal with flight, loss and expulsion contrary to the mostly politically motivated attempts of the refugees' organizations¹.

What counts?

The institute's approach goes beyond academic research and the text-based teaching of historical knowledge. It emphasises the physical aspects of history. This approach has been disputed in the German academic sphere recently under the title 'public history'. The fruitful synergy of reflection and action, theory and practice, science and fun is still rather contested². While the academic discourse on 'public history' basically focuses on the use and misuse of history in media, entertainment and politics³, the approach of the Institute for Applied History made on the Oder concentrates on applying history in civic education and reconciliation projects that bridge the gap between historical sciences and the society with the aim to foster dialogue, knowledge and interest in the other – in brief with the aim of enhancing understanding between German and Poles.

What are thus the key-factors of this Applied History? Without doubt there are places in the world that seem more contradictory and that produce more questions to a conscious mind than others, such as borderlands. Consequently, the place is important for disseminating interesting facts about history. Of course the notion of territory, landscape, geography holds nothing new for a historian. Yet, travelling to the place, being on the spot and discovering with one's own senses the traces of history, makes historical research much more exciting.

Besides this, it always helps when dealing with history has a direct link to everyday life. The present must produce questions for the past and the questions should not stop at national borders or within other categories – be it academic disciplines or generations. It is a local edit of global interferences, but only through local history can one equally involve people outside academic circles.

Another key factor is live conversations with "historical witnesses". Narrating – this old pattern of transmitting knowledge – plays a crucial role in the physical approach to history I have introduced. It is nothing new, to point out that subjective narrations are helpful in perceiving history through the prism of a human life, but not in claiming historical truth.

Other instruments of physically facing history are analysing photographs, postcards, paintings or questioning architecture, infrastructure, museums, the representation and division of power, and

¹ Mention should be made of few organizations that are organized under the roof of the "Bund der Vertriebenen" (Federation of Expellees) and that are practising successful reconciliation projects between Germans and Poles aside the loud political and media scene, e.g. the Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Landsberg an der Warthe. A concise summary of the Federation of Expellees' evolution in Western and Eastern Germany can be found in: Nießer Jacqueline, Geschlossene Gesellschaft – Vertriebenenorganisation in Deutschland, Diplomarbeit, Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder) 2005.

² More in Hardtwig, Wolfgang/Schug, Alexander (Hg.), History sells! Angewandte Geschichte als Wissenschaft und Markt, Stuttgart 2009.

³ See the conference report on "Public History in Germany and the United States. Fields, Developments and Debates in Praxis and Theory" 25.06.2009-27.06.2009, Berlin, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 08.08.2009, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=2735>>.

especially voids. The first aspects mean actively watching, the last means wondering: why is something broached, and something else not?

Of course, that approach does need a good base of knowledge. It's not without cause that the Institute for Applied History works in close cooperation with the European University Viadrina. "Applied history" is thus no contra-model against academic reflection on history. "Applied history" is an addition to the academic milieu that tries to bridge the gap between academic historical analysis and the historical perceptions of the everyday people. This popular way of dealing with the past has to go, - at least in the German-Polish borderland - , beyond borders: of nations, of genres, of generations or institutions.

While interacting with place, presence and local people, the Institute for Applied History creatively uses history in civic educational projects in the German-Polish borderland. It aims at fostering a regional identity that overcomes national paradigms, but that refers to the specific situation along the border with the river as its pivotal point. Applied History as a best practice in the representation of history in the German-Polish borderland can be evaluated only in the long run. However, it can be seen as a comprehensive method to foster a local edit of a multiple European identity.

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The essay submitted is the work of only me, Jacqueline Nießer; any parts taken from other sources are appropriately referenced in the essay.