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Workshop Report

"Research in times of multiple crises? Challenges and Research Perspectives for Eastern European Studies", MLU Halle, 6 and 7 June 2023

by Anne Kluger, Sven Jaros and Gundula Pohl

Including anonymised quotes from the feedback on the workshop

What to do when access to Russian archives for the doctoral thesis on Europeans in 17th century Moscow is blocked, when the archives in Ukraine for the study of Soviet prisoners of war between 1941 and 1944 can no longer be visited, or when the interview partners on property relations in Belarusian villages as the most important data basis for the research are suddenly no longer accessible, simply have other priorities than interviews with academics, or would even put them in danger?!

If one looks at the academic vitae of many young academics, it becomes clear how strongly they are linked to recent crises. Revolution of Dignity, Crimean annexation and war in the Donbass in 2014; protests in Belarus and the Corona crisis since 2020 and now the escalation of the Russian war against Ukraine. In recent years, these events and developments have moved and affected all those researching Eastern Europe on various levels - in terms of content, research organisation, finances and emotions. This is particularly true for doctoral students and postdocs, because they are less flexible in terms of thematic and pragmatic "possibilities of evasion" for systemic reasons. The state of crisis has become the "new normal" for this generation of Eastern European scholars. In addition, many young academics are active in civil society and professional networks such as the Young German Society for Eastern European Studies (Junge DGO), the Association for Student Exchange in Central and Eastern Europe (GFPS) or the Academic Network Eastern Europe (akno). This form their view of research questions and their own location within the research landscape and motivates them to engage with the social responsibility of academia and academics.

Immediately after the beginning of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Sven Jaros and Anne Kluger sought an exchange with Martin Aust, the president of the Association of Eastern European Historians (VOH), to talk about the consequences of the war for Eastern European studies. He had already initiated this debate in an article in the FAZ. The aim of the exchange was to make the voices of academics in the qualification phase more heard in the discussion about the future of research. In May and November 2022, two online formats took place in which these questions were discussed from different perspectives. In addition, the issue found its way into the general meetings of VOH and DGO.

The most important conclusion of the different formats was the resolution to stay in touch, to exchange about common or similar difficulties and to develop collaborative solutions. At the beginning of June this year, about 20 academics of all qualification levels met at the Martin Luther University in Halle (MLU) to discuss the effects of the multiple crises of the recent past on their respective research processes. The workshop was organised by Lisa Füchte, Corinne Geering, Sven Jaros, Anne Kluger, Laura Krebs, Elisa Satjukow and Marie Schwarz. The format was supported by the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO), the MLU with the Aleksander-Brückner Centre for Polish Studies, the Leibniz ScienceCampus "Eastern Europe - Global Area" (EEGA), the VOH and the DGO.

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It was a really great crowd that you brought together.

The workshop in Halle was divided into three parts. The first block dealt with the specific challenges that the participants face when working on their research projects. These were asked in advance and clustered. At three World Café tables, the participants were able to discuss the topics of access to archives, access to the field and political framework conditions and clarify where there are obstacles and a need for discussion and where they would like to receive help.

In the second block, perspectives for solving these difficulties were presented. For this purpose, the organisers had invited experts who, based on their respective expertise and field of work, were able to point out alternatives for research and data collection.

In the third and last block, the challenges met the perspectives. At three further World Café tables, the participants had extensive discussions with the experts and explored together how the respective possibilities could be applied to the specific research of the participants and what further needs there might be for this.

I liked the good, friendly atmosphere during the workshop, it was very easy to exchange with the other participants. The experts were very well chosen – the burning issues were addressed and good solutions were suggested.

The individual World Café rounds aimed directly at the individual needs of the participants. The diversity of challenges resulting from the political situations and their social consequences in Eastern Europe became clear. Young academics are confronted with closed archives and partly destroyed collections. Research fields in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus remain inaccessible for an indefinite period. Right-wing conservative governments, for example in Poland and Hungary, and the rise of radical right-wing structures endanger academic freedom, and sensitive research topics can be associated with personal risk. Scientific networks were interrupted or dissolved at the beginning of the war, and funding for projects was partially discontinued.

The proposals for solutions presented by the experts and developed in discussion with the participants referred directly to these challenges. They ranged from practical assistance such as the presentation of online collections or academic platforms to discussions about digital interviewing. In the discussions, the participants also brought in their own experiences in crisis management.

The Bavarian State Library is undoubtedly an important contact for young researchers, regardless of their research location. With their numerous contacts in the international academic community, the staff of the Eastern European Department open up participation in a wide-ranging network of institutions in Eastern and Central Europe. These can be helpful when entering the field, searching for interview partners or collecting sources. But not only Munich and the Berlin State Library, but also the respective local research and university libraries can be important points of contact. It is advisable to contact the respective subject librarians.

The participants also discussed the possibilities that a continued decentralisation or decolonisation of Eastern Europe offers for research. This concerns not only the softening of the hitherto often Russia-centred perspective and the increased focus on other countries of the former Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, but also the elaboration of the transnational interconnections of Eastern Europe with Western Europe as well as in a global sense.

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I think it is a good thing that you also invited Master students interested in pursuing a PhD in Eastern European History or the neighbouring fields. I can imagine that the interaction was inspirational, but also cautioning for them. I wish that I could have had a similar opportunity to get in touch with 'academia' during my study days.

In addition to very practical suggestions for solutions, the discussions during the workshop encouraged participants to reflect on their own position as researchers. Questions about the ethical responsibility of "Western" institutions and researchers and the active endangerment of interview partners in Russia and Belarus by contacting them were discussed, as were the privileges of the mostly white-read participants with German passports. For them, for example, it is much easier to move to a neighboring country of Russia for meetings with contacts or as a research space than for those with Ukrainian or Armenian citizenship.

The workshop opened up an important space for exchange. A more in-depth continuation of many of the points raised is planned within the framework of the Young DGO. Young researchers are particularly affected by the poor funding, the insecure employment conditions in academia and its strongly hierarchical, sometimes even discriminatory structures. Discussions about everyday challenges, about individual research processes, the respective teaching experiences and the shared enthusiasm for East Central and Eastern European studies give strength and encourage the decision to continue (for the time being) in academia.

I benefited a lot from this event. It has encouraged me to prepare a project proposal on an alternative topic where I can avoid the problems posed by Russia's aggression.

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