

Introduction

This thematic issue of the *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* consists of five contributions from the interdisciplinary conference on “Violence and Societies in East Central Europe, 17th to 20th century”, which took place in Vilnius (Lithuania), October 14th-16th, 2010. The conference was organised under the auspices and with the support of the research network *Gewaltgemeinschaften* – “Communities of Violence” (University of Gießen), in co-operation with the Herder Institute (Marburg), the Nordost Institute (Lüneburg) and the Lithuanian Institute of History (Vilnius). The goal of the conference was to gather together young scholars for a discussion on different forms of societal and group violence, with a primary focus on various examples from East Central Europe.

The history of this particular region is full of such examples. For centuries, the peoples living here have witnessed some of the most dramatic and violent political, societal, economic and cultural conflicts. They were not only victims, but also perpetrators and collaborators. Violence was committed in religious conflicts, civil wars, struggles for independence, revolutions, coups d'état and other conflicts. Many East Central Europeans actively participated in the First and the Second World Wars, which led to new forms of mass violence, including genocide, forced migration, labour, hunger, rape, etc. It is little wonder, therefore, that the American historian Timothy Snyder has called this part of Europe “the bloodlands”.¹

The five articles included here explore only several forms of these acts of violence: the militant life of the 17th century Ukrainian Cossacks; the intrusion of political violence into the domestic sphere in post-World War I Hungary; the depiction of violent scenes in political posters in interwar Latvia; a comparison of the dynamics and specificities of anti-Jewish pogroms in Poland in 1918-1920 and 1945/46; and the fierce suppression of an emerging Lithuanian hippie movement by the Soviet authorities during the 1960s and 1970s.

Although the cases under discussion are scattered in time and space, there are still several common threads which can be identified. First, there is a general pattern evident in the emergence and dynamics of groups and “Communities of Violence” (*Gewaltgemeinschaften*). The intention to commit a violent act is one of the key bonding and stabilising elements of such a group, and the clarity of this goal further solidifies it. The examples discussed indicate that violence-driven groups exist temporarily and thereafter either dissi-

¹ TIMOTHY SNYDER: *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010.

pate, transform or find other objects for their aggression. When there are a number of similar groups, a competition between them can occur, in which every group has to prove its superiority (physical or otherwise) and resilience in order to survive. The physical or moral elimination of enemies is rationalised, for example in the case of the pogromists, the Cossacks, or the totalitarian structures of control, by motives such as: the “righteousness” of the cause, the “normalisation” of society, the “purification” of the nation, or the elimination of socio-economic inequality, or by more pragmatic goals such as the increase of material wealth, or the removal of competitors.

Moreover, acts of violence tend to occur more often where societies enter into dramatic political, social, cultural or spatial flux. This is especially indicative for East Central Europe: as a transitional region situated between Western and Eastern cultures, it carries the full weight of the ambiguous term “borderland”, which is reflected to a great extent in the Cossack “frontier” region (Starčenko); the paradigmatic societal transformations in the new Eastern Europe after World War I (Reder, Gioielli, Brūmane-Gromula); and the struggle for (Western) freedoms under an (Eastern) totalitarian regime (Mikailienė). Furthermore, violence is committed for the sake of better “order”, “stability” and “security”. This is especially noticeable in Gioielli’s article, where two social spaces – the public and the private – collided as a result of the destruction inflicted by World War I. Traditional domestic life collapsed and the new order was introduced by the proponents of communist society.

Somewhat similar patterns can be seen in the case of the Lithuanian hippie movement, as discussed in Mikailienė’s paper. Attempts to promote a colourful alternative culture in parallel to a more or less monochromatic Soviet lifestyle resulted in the excessive use of force in suppressing alternative expressions of individuality in an ideologically collective society. This resulted in the politicisation of a part of the Lithuanian hippies, which contributed to a great extent to the political manifestations in Kaunas which followed Romas Kalanta’s self-immolation in 1972.

Violence also has a visual aspect. While the iconography of violence used, for instance, in the Bolshevik posters of the Civil War period has been thoroughly researched², much less has been done concerning the newly independent societies that emerged out of the multi-ethnic empires after 1918. The depiction of violence in political posters in interwar Latvia is analysed in Brūmane-Gromula’s article. The author focuses not only on these visualised forms of violence, but also contemplates what the thresholds were that Lat-

² PETER KENEZ: *The Birth of the Propaganda State. Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, Cambridge 1985; STEFAN PLAGGENBORG: *Gewalt und Militanz in Sowjetrußland 1917-1930*, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44 (1996), S. 409-430; VICTORIA E. BONNELL: *Iconography of Power. Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley 1997.

vian society was able to tolerate. The state played an important role in introducing regulations and setting limits for the depictions of violence, because, as Brūmane-Gromula demonstrates, one can notice a certain correlation between the scenes of political struggle in the posters and actual fights on the streets.

To conclude this introduction, therefore, it is clear that this thematic issue cannot cover even a fraction of the complexity of relations between societies or groups and the phenomenon of violence. Nevertheless, we hope that this small contribution will be useful for further research of the subject. In presenting yet another set of perspectives from the history of East Central Europe the editors hope to encourage a comparative approach to the study of forms of violence in this particular region – the main focus of the *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung*.

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