beschloss Martin Schulze Wessel das 26. Bohemisten-Treffen und dankte allen Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmern. Wie im Jahr zuvor ging es danach auf der Plattform „Gather Town“ in ein virtuelles Bräuhaus, wo alle Interessierten die Tagung informell ausklingen lassen konnten.

Astrid Theil München

POLITICAL CRISIS IN CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD AND TODAY

On 10 and 11 June 2022, the conference “Political Crisis in Central Europe in the Interwar Period and Today” took place at the European Studies Centre at St Antony’s College in Oxford. Organiser Martin Schulze Wessel (Munich) convened various international experts for the concluding conference of his Oxfordian Richard von Weizsäcker Fellowship year 2021/22. The fact that this event – after a pandemic-related postponement – coincided with Russia’s ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine compellingly highlighted the importance of dealing with contemporary crises also by means of historical comparison.

Following introductory words by Paul Betts (Oxford), Martin Schulze Wessel emphasised the current geopolitical crisis – and especially the previously hardly imaginable return of war to Europe. Comparing aspects of the interwar period to the world of today, the director of Munich’s Collegium Carolinum identified similarities including crisis narratives, mistrust in representative democracy, attacks against Western values, and populist movements as well as differences like the integration of Central European states into NATO and their change from nationality to nation-states. By encompassing social, cultural, and intellectual history, the conference succeeded in deepening understanding of crises past and present as well as fostering interest in the interwar period.

Jane Caplan (Oxford) introduced Panel 1 entitled “Crisis of Political Legitimacy” before Balázs Trencsényi (Vienna/Budapest) elaborated on “The Temporalities of Crisis: Rethinking the Conceptual History of Interwar Crisis Discourses in East Central Europe”. He identified eight major crises in interwar East Central Europe (e.g. of democracy, liberalism, the nation-state, or the European mind) and stressed the need to look behind explicit crisis narratives that can be used strategically to attract attention and establish agendas. Trencsényi concluded by appealing for a broadened view considering non-political (e.g. technological) and European crises as well. Such a wider perspective was subsequently assumed by Stefanie Middendorf (Jena), who spoke about “Financial and Democratic Crises Intertwined: The Interwar Years as a Space of Experience and Usable Past”. Her lecture focused on the Weimar Republic and its emergency policies as well as special legislation (“Sondergesetzgebung”), identifying connections between threats to the financial system and democracy. Emphasising the destabilising effect of persistent martial war rhetoric even in administrative/legal language, Middendorf proceeded to ask what we can learn from this “useable past” for today. The discussion added the topos of order/disorder and its particular importance in interwar crisis narrations.

Constantin Iordachi (Vienna/Budapest) opened Panel 2 on "Radical Semantics", chaired by Patricia Clavin (Oxford), with a lecture on "Saving the Nation: Charisma, Crisis, and Salvation in Interwar and Contemporary East Central Europe". He delineated a typology of political leaders of the interwar period – military, paramilitary, religious, and charismatic leaders along with royal dictators – and underlined their stylisation as national saviours, a motif that only populists like Erdoğan, Orbán, and Putin partially adapt today. Whereas leaders in the 1920s and 1930s associated salvation with violence, false accusations, or the threat of enemies while today's right-wing populists use narratives of representing "the real people", a cult of masculinity, or cleansing metaphors, Iordachi also pointed out striking similarities, such as the activation of emotions like fear and anger or a demonisation of enemies. Jákub Rákosník (Prague) lectured on "Czech and Czechoslovak Communists 1921-2021: From the Anti-system Party to the Monopoly of Power and Back", tracing the history of the Czech(oslovak) Communist Party from one of the strongest parties in interwar times to a major player after the fall of the Iron Curtain until 2021. After articulating social and national protest as a crisis beneficiary during the interwar period, it remained an anti-system party but abandoned its revolutionary claims over time. Until 2021, when the party was no longer elected into parliament, it embodied continuity – not least in its rhetoric – even throughout system changes. Dietmar Müller's (Leipzig) paper "Rule of Law for Foreign Consumption? Discourses on Sovereignty in the Interwar and Post-EU-accession Periods in East Central Europe" completed the panel with a spotlight on Romania and the relationship between Europe's periphery and centre. Müller showed that Western support for the East has mostly been conditional and demanded special obligations like the interwar minority protection treaties, EU monitoring mechanisms, or anti-corruption laws, interpreting these findings as centre-periphery conflicts. The subsequent discussion illustrated the semantics of heroism, anti-heroism, and post-heroism with previous and current examples.

With "'Doing Violence' and Its Limits: Paramilitary Movements in the Interwar Years", Daniel Siemens (Newcastle) opened Panel 3 entitled "Political Violence and the Myth of Victimhood" and chaired by Martin Schulze Wessel. Using a practical history approach, Siemens looked at effects of paramilitary movements (including flags or martial music) and violence on people's everyday lives during the 1920s and 1930s, as well as at unsuccessful violence and "Christian fighters". Grzegorz Krzywiec (Warsaw) continued with "From Death to National Community? Political Murder, the Cult of Martyrs, and the Crisis of Political Culture in Interwar Poland (1922-1939)". Overcoming the lack of attention paid to this topic during the 20th century, he provided examples of political assassinations and revealed the ethnic dimension of such murders in the "nationality war" between Poles and Germans. Like many others at the time, interwar Polish society appeared very violent, especially toward national minorities, and developed various measures of exclusion. By contrast, Ota Konrád (Prague) asked about "An Exception in Postwar Central Europe? Czechoslovakia and Collective Violence". Despite accentuating tensions within the country's ethnically diverse democracy, he emphasised – as did Martin Schulze Wessel in the subsequent discussion – its comparatively peaceful character

during the interwar period. While ethnic violence was the exception and mostly sought symbolic targets during these years, the situation changed after 1945 when it was directed against the physical presence of Germans. It also became clear that unlike Germany's, interwar Czechoslovakia's political culture was compromise-oriented. Although the revolution set off in 1989 remained non-violent and political violence continued to be a taboo among the public, Konrád also identified blind spots like massive anti-Roma attacks by right-wing extremists.

The next morning, Melissa Feinberg (Rutgers University) opened Panel 4 on "Radical Movements and Gender" with her lecture "From Godless Amazons and Double-Earners to the Gender Lobby: Anti-gender Activism in Interwar Czechoslovakia and Today's Czech Republic". She analysed recent campaigns primarily by Eastern European actors against "gender" that describe the "LGBT ideology" as "worse than communism and Nazism put together" (Polish bishop) or as a colonial campaign by the West. Comparing this current criticism to feminist activism in interwar Czechoslovakia, Feinberg revealed striking parallels with regard to topics like family and marriage law (including pregnancy) as well as narratives, e.g. destruction of the traditional family or fear of feminisation, and concluded by calling for further research. With "Communist Women, Feminism, and Democracy in Interwar Hungary: Between Radicalism and Consensus", Zsófia Lóránd (Cambridge) combined perspectives of socialism and feminism, stressing the transformation of capitalism as well as the abolishment of class division and patriarchy as common goals. She illustrated her findings using Hungarian social democrat Anna Kéthly as a personification of both ideas. The panel discussion chaired by Paul Betts highlighted the rich tradition of feminist activism in Eastern Europe and the often surprising cooperation between very different actors.

Finally, Panel 5 on "Religion and Nationalism" was commenced by Paul Hanebrink (Rutgers University), who spoke about "The Return of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Historical Memory". Hungary's right-wing populist prime minister Viktor Orbán has repeatedly described his country as a Christian nation. Showing that such Christian nationalism was already strong in Hungary at the end of the 19th century, when the Catholic church united Hungary's nationalities but opposed civil marriage as anti-national, as well as in the first half of the 20th century with the anti-communist alliance of government and church, Hanebrink drew long lines of tradition. Mapping the complex position of Jews within this model – including the current demonisation of George Soros and simultaneous fraternisation with Benjamin Netanyahu – he illustrated the renaissance of a Christian concept of Hungary in which the weakness of liberal conservatism and Catholicism in Hungary became apparent. Darina Volf (Munich) lectured on "'The Protestants and Us': State, Nation, and Religion in Interwar and Today's Slovakia". She analysed the historical interplay between the influential Protestant minority and the Catholic majority in Slovakia as well as the ambivalent, partly destabilising and anti-democratic role of a nationalist Catholic church. With nationalist Slovaks opposing a multi-ethnic, Protestant Czechoslovakia and fighting for an independent Catholic nation during the interwar years, Slovak nationalists and orthodox Catholics still refer positively to the period, revering idols like Andrej Hlinka as a

"father of the nation". Volf detected a continuing conservative Catholic influence in Slovakia despite the fact that only half of the population is Catholic. In the discussion, Talitha Ilacqua (Oxford), the panel's chairwoman, asked about reasons for the weakness of liberal Catholicism across Eastern Europe and the under-researched role of communism.

The final roundtable provided a distillate of the points made during the conference, discussing key similarities and differences between political crises in the interwar time and today. Kate Lebow (Oxford) emphasised the closeness of the interwar period and its meaning for the memory of the 20th century. She convincingly advocated shifting the focus towards democracies and their functioning at the time, moving away from dictatorships and a Eurocentric view. Timothy Garton Ash (Oxford) agreed, also highlighting a selective instrumentalising of history by illiberal Eastern European leaders like Orbán and Kaczyński. Analysing their biographies, he added, could provide interesting findings on illiberalism. Furthermore, he condemned a Western orientalising of East Central Europe and asked how historians might better connect East and West, as well as the interwar and current times, without neglecting important differences such as the EU as a new actor. Benjamin Ziemann (Sheffield) appealed for combining semantical research with societal structures or institutions and including Eastern Europe much more in the interwar historiography. He criticised the tendency to think history only from the perspective of its ends and failures, especially for the interwar period, rejecting this approach as reductionist. Summarising the conference's impressively broad perspectives, Martin Schulze Wessel convincingly concluded that comparing aspects of the interwar period and today proved very fruitful. A publication in the series New German Historical Perspectives by Berghahn Books (New York/Oxford) will collect the contributions to this conference, which succeeded in revealing stimulating new aspects through the use of historical comparison.

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