

Collective research project

Planned Encounters

The term “Cold War” designates an era of division. Ideological differences divided the states of Europe into two hostile camps that stood in a threatening posture to one another. In most areas of life, people were forced to position themselves between the two poles of this world. And yet, this conflict occurred at a time when more and more people set out to visit and explore other countries in their free time. In the 1960s, tourism became an enormous phenomenon, and it was not just confined to vacations on the Mediterranean or in the Alps. More and more trips were made from western Europe to destinations beyond the “Iron Curtain”, resulting in encounters which did not always accord with the logic of the two systems’ opposition. Not least among the reasons for this were the expectations of travelers summed up in the sociologist John Urry’s phrase, “tourist gaze”. While the socialist host countries were eager to present themselves as showplaces for the efficiency and diversity of the socialist system rather than as mere holiday destinations, visitors from the west were often looking for something quite different. Some hoped to discover in eastern Europe a certain authenticity that seemed to them to have vanished in the west. Others treated the trip as a personal search for the traces of their own history or that of their family. As a result, the visited countries had to adjust their ways of presenting themselves to meet the visitors’ expectations and criteria of importance. Thus, the “tourist gaze” must be more broadly defined to denote a multiplicity of cultural, ethnic, political or personal expectations. The resulting heterogeneity of attitudes becomes especially clear when the experiences of travelers from the GDR are included in the mix. Their personal acquaintance with the socialist system enabled them to relate differently to the cultures and people of eastern Europe. Their goals and interests

sometimes overlapped with those of their west German counterparts, and were sometimes quite distinct.

The ethnic aspect becomes especially clear in connection with certain places, buildings and other artifacts that for many years had been regarded as typical examples of the German cultural heritage in eastern Europe. Many visitors still saw them as such, since that traditional attribution of significance was still promoted in West Germany. In eastern Europe, on the other hand, decisions concerning the conservation of specific monuments were underpinned by the firm belief that only socialist states were in a position to judge the value of cultural heritage sites. Not infrequently, the socialist interpretation superimposed itself on attempts to attribute a national significance to monuments that commemorated decisions of local importance, such as when the old town of Tallinn was presented as part of an emphatically Estonian past. Arguments as to who should decide which tourist destinations should be promoted were almost unavoidable.

For the indigenous people, too, the encounter with the “tourist gaze” was not without consequences. It operated like feedback in the way the inhabitants of the host country viewed their own country. Foreign perspectives were adapted into local patterns of interpretation and influenced the way the country presented itself through tourist offices and travel agencies. The authorities of the time knew perfectly well that this was a dangerous undertaking, for it meant bringing in people who saw things from the perspective of different experience, who applied a different standard of comparative value and who offered new interpretations. The solution seemed to be to isolate the visitors to a large extent. Ideally, they would contemplate sanitized landmarks as if in a bubble, spend their much-needed foreign currency on souvenirs produced especially for them, and visit cafes and restaurants that catered exclusively for the tourist market. Other forms of encounter took place in the prescribed formats of delegation meetings, youth excursions or sports events. In each of these cases, the state authorities were careful to keep an eye on the travelers. The contacts that occurred in these circumstances were strictly “planned encounters”.

Even this measure was hard to enforce. It was most easily evaded when curious visitors were allowed to make individual trips. But even the stricter, organized group trips allowed some freedom for unofficial contacts and opinionated observations which could hardly be controlled. Especially the so-called nostalgia tourists, who knew the places they visited and sometimes even had contacts there, gave the security agencies of the socialist states a considerable headache. The question whether tourism in the long run contributed to the erosion of the socialist state or led instead to an increased understanding of the socialist experiment on the part of western visitors, can hardly be answered conclusively. In any case, examples of certainties being thrown into

question by new contacts are not hard to find. These also show how encounters across the “Iron Curtain”, encounters of the familiar with the unfamiliar, led to the creation of new relationships and new meanings.

“Planned Encounters”, the collaborative research project of the Northeast Institute (IKGN e.V.), looks at various aspects of west-east tourism. The starting point in each case is an individual source that is analyzed and contextualized.