

Research – Research concept

Orders – Appropriations – Experiences

The Northeast Institute is an extramural university research unit that concentrates on the history of northeast Europe and the German settlement areas in Russia. A salient characteristic of these regions is their ethnic, social, economic, cultural, religious and governmental variety. The Germans who resided there made a strong impression on the region, as did in some places its historical membership of the German, specifically the Prussian, state. In addition, German politics exerted a great influence on the development of northeast and east-central Europe beyond the borders of Germany. For that reason, the German connections with these territories have a central importance for research. The history of the indigenous German population and of its neighbors is understood as a transnational, interwoven history. Multilateral contacts, modes of transfer and cultural exchanges among the various population groups left their mark on the region, as did conflicts between minority groups, the German politics of occupation in the 20th century and repressive measures on the basis of ethnicity.

In its research projects and activities grounded in the 19th and 20th centuries, the Institute places special emphasis on these regions' connection to Europe. The geographical area, its mental landscape and spheres of life are explored under three headings – Orders, Appropriations and Experiences – that circumscribe the Institute's areas of inquiry and provide a framework for the generation of new research directions and projects. These headings give a necessary structure to the aim of clarifying and exploring not only political but also social, cultural and everyday processes.

Orders

Life is organized in orders. Through the collective agreement on norms and values, human activities can be evaluated and predicted. Social interaction is only made possible by limiting the options for interpretation and behavior. In this way, order can be sought at quite dissimilar levels of activity. Institutional orders are fundamental to any system. Social life is crisscrossed by systems of rules which provide ways of making sense of the moment. In such dissimilar institutions as the family, the nation, the League of Nations, as well as for example the system of international exchange of money and goods, certain guiding ideas acquire permanence and create distinct areas for collective interaction. In this respect, different degrees of formality may be observed. State institutions, legal systems or international agreements create quite clearly codified frameworks. They are often felt as conditions imposed upon human beings. Other orders, in contrast, are practically invisible because they are so thoroughly interwoven with everyday practices or even with basic cognitive operations: the limits of what can be said are grounded in discursive orders. Epistemological orders determine the systematic form in which opinions can be held. Gender orders manifest themselves in cultural, legal and social hierarchies and valuations of worth, without being absorbed by them. Implicit rules of economic rationality determine conduct in systems of business. For the most part, these present themselves as natural arrangements to which there are no alternatives, although in fact they are subject to spatial and temporal change.

So far as the study of history is concerned, the main questions are how such orders come into being and how they acquire permanence, as well as how they are questioned and revoked. In this connection, the instruments with which orders are enforced become of interest. How are they justified and manifested? What sanctions are available to impose a given idea of order despite opposition? Modern northeastern Europe, an area of diversity and contradictions, can be understood as an area of disparate regimes of order. The behavior of Germans towards other ethnic groups is an example of this. Changing national, social and cultural connections were involved. Moreover, the downfall of certain cultural, legal or political orders brought about by human activity, wars or natural catastrophes may serve as understandable examples, as may the formation and stabilization of new orders.

Appropriations

In the 20th century, the ideological appropriation of geographical areas was an important means of articulating changing cultural or local interests, particularly in northeastern Europe. Old political and geographical structures crumbled, and new constellations arose. With respect to culture and language in an historical perspective, these political disruptions made for considerable dissonance in the regions as they struggled to redefine themselves. In order to mask this and create a coherent sense of identity, a new political configuration based in memory arose in the public sphere. Against this backdrop, the term appropriation refers to the processes of accommodation and transformation by means of which a region was reshaped in a new context. The multilayered practices of such appropriation in new conditions create a rich field for scholarly investigation. Oblivion, repression and relativization are of equal importance here with mythologizing, ritualizing, falsification, essentialization or overemphasis. Rather than denoting a superficial arrangement brought about by means of financial, political or cultural influence, appropriation offers a general perspective on multilayered, ambivalent processes and phenomena that not infrequently lead to a manifold codification. Its hallmarks are the presence of the old in the new, the past in the present, the latent in the manifest.

At the same time, the perspective afforded by appropriation forms the basis of a conception of culture which, because of its stratified character, can only be understood in the plural. Rigid notions with national connotations (borders, landscapes, historical narratives, politics of identity) can be analyzed, and typical patterns of colonial thinking and behaving as they were brought to bear on minorities, for example, can be carved out.

Appropriation, then, is not to be understood as a template-like, theoretical rallying point, but rather as a way of unifying a wide variety of methodological and theoretical approaches (such as cultural transfer, palimpsest or acculturation, for example), and of laying the foundation of an interdisciplinary portal.

Experiences

The term experiences denotes a way of analyzing individual pages from a multilayered past. No description of human existence in a historical context is complete without attention to lived experience. Such an approach shifts the focus of attention from the centers of state power and the elites to the history of the periphery and border areas as well as to the experiential world of wider segments of the population, without, however, ignoring the variegated network of human negotiations. Temporally bound, experiences create spaces in which historical players with all

their baggage of assumptions, attitudes, business strategies and standards of value and norms can be viewed.

The reality of human experience stands in close relationship to social systems of order built upon patterns of living and behavior that are regarded as norms. Being subject to constant change, however, these norms, although they are features of everyday life, must be constantly articulated, defended, represented and asserted anew, not only within a given group but also as they pertain to the governing authority. The way of viewing experience which results from this takes on the character of a bridge between individuals and large social groups, and between structures and single events. The study of subjectively perceived aspects of historical events can thereby draw distinct historical disciplines together: as well as daily, micro or gender history it covers such classical approaches as political and social history and the history of ideas. As a result, the paradigm of experience displays a methodologically comprehensive character. Thanks to the ever-increasing number of witnesses of past events, personally lived experience is offset by collective memory. Thus, experiences are held in a state of tension between the individual and the collective—between the cultural/discursive and the communicative—roles of memory.

Basic Principles of the Institute's Work

The three headings offer a framework for work in research (monographs, contributions to learned journals, other publications) and work in the wider field of professional activity. The primary mission is to identify, excavate historical foundations and make available the results of research to the scholarly and general public. The examination and furnishing of sources, handbooks and scholarly editions are parts of this mission. Digital formats will play an increasingly important role in the future. An essentially broader task is to deliver the results of research within the learned community through university and extra-curricular instruction. Scholarly conventions held by the Institute also serve this purpose, as do public lecture series designed to appeal to a wider public.

Moreover, the Institute's links to the ongoing scholarly discourse enable it to generate themes and lines of inquiry related to the three headings as they arise in an international context. The Institute especially cultivates a working relationship with scholars and learned bodies in northeastern Europe. The linguistic and specialized expertise of the Institute's staff affords it access to discussions and research results that are either marginalized in German historiography or do not figure there at all. The online presentation "Translated Histories. German History in Eastern Europe. Theses, Research Projects, Controversies from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russia in German Translation" serves as an example of this. The purpose of the presentation is

to introduce and comment upon contributions from eastern Europe regarding German connections with the region, by addressing a German-speaking public. The constantly growing corpus of digital materials should promote and facilitate dialogue among scholars and for the general public.

The annual volumes of the scholarly publication *Northeast Archive – Periodical for Regional History* are devoted to themes of cultural history. Volumes on special topics are edited by specialists from Germany and abroad. International authors, particularly ones from eastern Europe, have the opportunity to publish in German or English in a refereed journal. With its double-blind peer-review process, the *Northeast Archive* satisfies the standard for scholarly publication. The publication list of the Institute is weighted towards monographs relating to the fields of inquiry offered in fulfillment of professional degrees.

The Northeast Library represents an indispensable working instrument for scholars at the Institute, yet is also open to the general public. It houses a collection of specialized literature on east European history that comprises at present some 160,000 items relating to the Institute's fields of investigation. In addition to monographs, it includes periodicals, maps, microfilms, picture postcards and vedutas.