

Reimagining Polish Worldwideness: Cross-Local Encounters and Global Arrangements

Veranstalter: Kommission for the History of Germans in Poland/Kommission für die Geschichte der Deutschen in Polen
Ort: Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe – Institute of the Leibniz Association, Marburg
Datum: 19-21.09.2019
Bewerbungsschluss: 15.03.2019

In September 1920, Zygmunt Kamiński, a young journalist reporting from the Polish-Soviet War, noticed two interesting soldiers in a Polish army field kitchen somewhere in the East. To his surprise, both were black and had voluntarily joined the Polish army. The story was so unusual that not only Kamiński but several Polish journals found it exciting and reported about the Polish Air Force with its „two negroes, at everybody’s beck and call“ (Tygodnik Ilustrowany, 27.11.1920, Nr. 8, 887). As the story was further told in the media, the participation of these ethnic African soldiers inspired the members of some squadrons to paint their faces black. By imitating the colonial army and presenting an “exotic menace”, they wanted to frighten the Soviet army and defeat it. Whether this exoticising plan failed or succeeded, is unclear. In fact, it is not relevant. The way the story was told and labelled as sensational, is far more interesting and let us ask, to what extent the cross-cultural encounters were singular? Or by going one step further: why does every cross-cultural contact, from the 1920s to the present day, appear unique and extraordinary? What do they tell us about the structural and mental transformation of people involved in the cross-cultural relation? What kind of impact do they have on their close and distant societal and natural environment? Which ties, communication and mobility practices do they establish and what kind of networks and (temporary) localities do they construct?

The presence of black soldiers in the Polish army in the 1920s attracted as much attention as the cycling trip across Africa undertaken by Kazimierz Nowak in the 1930s. Both the non-European appearance in Poland and the Polish interests in non-European areas, symbolized here in the African figure, seem to be an excellent material for an anecdote, a sensational note or some margin remark. However, the conventional Eurocentric master narratives do not leave much room for the less expectable entangled history.

This conference wants to change this and unveil the less visible, hidden and/or neglected cross-cultural moments of Polish worldwideness. We would like to explore connections between Poland and the „global world“ on the one hand and between Eastern European regions/localities/local events and distant localities on the other hand. We are looking for papers that address cross-cultural encounters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which affected local/regional/national societies and cultures, and/or demonstrate, how their significance was negotiated and/or is being negotiated in the present. We are interested in the universal validity and transformation impact of such entanglements, understood as intensification of worldwide social relations and connections, and in the ways how there were historically passed on, used as a figure for the shaping of local/regional/national self-identity and/or reshaping the Polish/Eastern European understanding of its „own“ globalization and worldwideness.

The conference will focus on Polish cross-cultural encounters and aim to promote broader comparative approaches. Therefore, all projects which are situated in different geographical contexts are welcome, as we are looking forward to discussing case studies and comparing perspectives from all parts of East and Central Europe from a global perspective.

Potential focal points may be (but not exclusively) located within the fields of migration, circulation of knowledge, the impact of materialities (like for instance flow of commodities), translocal/transregional/transnational/international entanglements, cultural influences, and economic cooperation. We are particularly interested in questions applying to power relations, density of entanglements, temporal agencies and practices, directions and fluidity of narratives or constructions of dependencies. We especially welcome papers that connect case studies with an innovative theoretical framework. We are open to contributions from the fields of history, sociology, ethnology, anthropology, etc.

The conference will be held at Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe – Institute of the Leibniz Association in Marburg. Advanced graduate students, early career scholars, and senior researchers are encouraged to apply. Abstracts (max. 300 words) for 15-20-minute papers and author biographies (100 words) should be submitted to Markus Krzoska (markus.krzoska@geschichte.uni-giessen.de) and Justyna Aniceta Turkowska (justynaturkowska@me.com) on or before March 15th 2019.

Applicants will be notified of the selection results in April 2019. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us.