

Halecki Revisited: Europe's Conflicting Cultures of Remembrance

– *Stefan Troebst (History, Slavic Studies), Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum Geschichte und Kultur Ostmitteleuropas (GWZO) and University of Leipzig (Germany)*

In the early 1950s, the Vienna-born US-Polish historian Oskar Halecki developed a model of "the limits and divisions of European history" from antiquity to the Cold War. Based on cultural and religious criteria, he identified three historical meso-regions: Western Europe, Central Europe and Eastern Europe. In his view, however, Central Europe in fact consisted of two rather different parts--West Central Europe, i.e., Germany (and probably Austria), and East Central Europe, in his words "the borderlands of Western civilization", that is, the lands in between Germany and Russia. Not coincidentally, Halecki's East Central Europe historically resembled the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the early modern period as well as the group of states which in 1945 according to the decisions at Jalta fell under Soviet hegemony.

It is a striking fact that in terms of cultures of remembrance post-1989/91 Europe resembles very much Halecki's historical Europe with her three respectively four meso-regions. As in particular the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II in 2005 showed, in Western Europe, i.e., the Western part of the European Union, an "Atlantic", victorious remembrance prevails; in West Central Europe, that is in partly post-fascist, partly post-communist Germany 1945 is remembered ambivalently as defeat and liberation; in East Central Europe--since 2004 part of the EU--the Jalta syndrome as well as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement of 1939 shape collective memory; and in Eastern Europe, that is, in the Russian Federation and some other parts of the CIS, 1945 functions as a new founding myth--instead of the now discharged one of 1917.

Thus, the lieu de memoire "1945" stands for the limits and divisions of Europe's culture of remembrance and for two fundamental memory conflicts. The first one concerns East Central and Eastern Europe. Here "Jalta" and "Reichstag" symbolize two diametrically opposed views on history. What in post-Soviet memory is the "liberation of Europe" by the Red Army is perceived in Poland or the Baltic states as a mere change in regimes of foreign occupation. The other memory conflict is the one between "the West" and the rest, between a Holocaust memory being turned into the founding myth of the EU on the one hand and the emerging GULag memory in East Central and--to a lesser degree--in Eastern Europe.

As the ongoing controversy between the former Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sandra Kalniete, and the Vice-Chairman of the Central Council of the Jews of Germany, Salomon Korn, demonstrates the cleavage running through EU's cultures of remembrance is becoming narrower. The opposite is the case with the memory conflict between Russia and the former Soviet satellites, as the conflict over their participation in the 2005 celebrations in Moscow showed. So it looks as if with the Eastern enlargement also an enlargement of the "EU memory" is underway. An additional proof for this view is the turn the heated Polish-German debate over a German "Centre against Expulsions" in Berlin took since 2003: In the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe as well as in talks between the governments of the Visegrád Four with Germany and Austria a pan-European project of an institution dealing with the history of forced migrations in Europe in the 20th century has been agreed upon. Obviously, the two halves of Halecki's Central Europe—East Central and West Central Europe—share a common memory.