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CONTACT ZONES. CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN THE POLISH-CZECH-GERMAN BORDER REGION¹

Borders are fundamental elements of national states; they shape and limit territories, they control migration, trade, travelling. Borders can be closed for a certain period of time or for certain groups of people. They are guarded, marked, and video-monitored. State borders are often considered to be more or less natural, but in fact they are historically developed. However, they are sometimes linked to natural barriers like rivers, lakes, or mountains. Borders are prominent metaphor and political reality at the same time.

Large-scaled regions in Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany passed through a drastic process of transformation. Due to the politics of the German Nazi regime, and as a consequence of World War II, the borders shifted; millions of people lost their homes and were obliged to resettle. This forced migration caused the emergence of, in some cases, new societies. At the same time, the three nations were transformed into socialistic regimes. Rural areas in the border regions in particular experienced a major change: a significant transfer of, and an increase, in population. It can therefore be said that these zones represent a kind of social and political laboratory, almost unique in Europe.

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Figure 1. 3-country-corner near Zittau.

Source: Uta Bretschneider, 2016.

This article is a result of the research project “Contact Zones. Cultural practices in the German-Czech-Polish borderland” (www.isgv.de/projekte/volkskunde/kontaktzonen, www.facebook.com/kontaktzonen/); it will give an insight into the work program and discuss our methodological approach. The core questions of the project concern how representations and functions of commemorative culture are performed and how the past and the present are dealt with in the border regions. The time frame for this project is set in reference to the historical caesuras in these borderland areas since World War II: the German occupation of Bohemia/Moravia and Poland, the end of World War II, the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, and the abolition of frontier controls three years later. These demarcations of cultural-political engagement are displayed, represented, staged, and transmitted by media and communication; they affect protagonists, initiatives, and various activities.

The main questions of the research project are: How did (and do) people cope with their own past and the official representation of history? Which consequences are still visible today, after the Czech Republic and Poland became EU-members in 2004? How does transnational cultural cooperation

work in that context? What kind of new impulses derive from those (mostly young) residents who have come to choose the border regions as their home today? In this sense the article deals with the parameters of constructing ‘new’ identities and the needs of affiliation.

Borderland – Characteristics of the Research Area

Within the geographical area of the study, political borders shifted several times; attributions and affiliations have changed accordingly. Since 1991, the association “Euroregion Neisse-Nisa-Nysa” has existed as one of the first accepted ways of cross-border co-operation in Central Europe (<http://www.neisse-nisa-nysa.org>). However this region is in no way a historical entity. Since 1945, the composition of the population has completely changed. The majority of the German-speaking population was expelled, and people from the eastern regions of Poland and Bohemia/Moravia were settled there. But even before that, in autumn 1938, many Czech, Jewish, and leftist people had fled the German-Czech border region after the German invasion of the Sudetenland. Today, there are few points of reference to the older structures. The river Neisse, originally a dividing factor, is now stylized into a factor of identity. As a national and natural border, it has only been familiar to its neighbours for three generations. These circumstances evoke the question of the implications to the region. Is it possible to implement “a new transnational identity” (Weger 2011, p. 93)?

Until the Second World War, a regional identity beyond national borders was an everyday experience in this area. As Katharina Eisch has pointed out, the Bohemian-Bavarian border was widely opened in the 1920s and 1930s – until 1938, when National Socialist policy led to the division of Czechoslovakia (Eisch 1996, p. 155). Furthermore, Moritz Csáky speaks in terms of a “multilingualism of the space” (2004). This means that, despite their affiliation to a communication space of their own (the “national culture”), the inhabitants participated in numerous “alien” cultural elements. These practices promoted “multilingualism” in the literal and the metaphorical sense. As a consequence, they caused a multi-polarity of individual and collective identities which became evident in the practical bi- or multilingualism of its residents. Since 1945, this integration of the regions through language has disappeared: today, only a fraction of the population speaks the language of their neighbors. Nevertheless, many Germans today believe that the German language is understood in the Czech Republic – which is certainly not the case (Lozoviuk 2012, p. 160). Due to these language barriers, collective regional identity today is mainly the result of the following factors: the promotion of economics and tourism, the self-positioning in pha-

ses of increasing globalization, as well as the implementation of historical-political interests.



Figure 2. Former border station between Germany and Poland.
Source: Uta Bretschneider, 2016.

The Polish-Czech-German border region connects three countries with an intense history of conflict, especially in the period of the 20th century. Since 2007, regular border controls have been abolished. However, state borders have recently seemed to become again more relevant in Europe. About 25 years after the end of the Cold War, the Schengen Agreement was partly suspended by several European states. The main reason for this measure is the increasing number of refugees.

As it has been since World War II, the area is still home to many migrants. These migrants are, for example, the former GDR-“Vertragsarbeiter” from Asia, refugees from Greece and resettlers from Western Poland. There are still many material traces of the former border controls, like that in Zittau, where an abandoned building tells of the past. The Polish-Czech-German border region is, as a periphery, “a zone of multilingualism and dialogue, of ambiguity and polyphony, of asynchronicities, contradictions and resistances.” “[C]ulture happens as change [...]” there (Eisch-Angus 2016, p. 244).

(Doing) Memory and (Doing) Identity

The quick succession of political upheavals and changing power structures has also influenced Eastern European commemorative cultures (cf. Jarowski 2005). Coherent historical spaces of experience cannot easily be defined. Furthermore, there is a competitive situation that exists in reference to the remembrance of the Stalinist acts of violence and the National Socialist crimes. The Eastern European societies are also struggling nowadays with increasing nationalism. After clear orientation systems had disintegrated, new patterns have had to be found. The disruption of a long-term creation of tradition led to “new” and creative manifestations – although not limited to regions with a ‘broken national biography’ (cf. Hobsbawn, Ranger 1983). According to Maurice Halbwachs, we only remember what is communicated, passed on, and represented in the present, what can be localized within the social frame of reference of the collective memory (Halbwachs 1985, Assmann 2007)². The collective memory is the key to the shaping of cultural identity. In our project, we will deal with the construction, the deconstruction, and the reconstruction of memories. Basically, we aim to explore the question of which events in the border regions, if any, are relevant in regard to commemorative culture and the creation of identity.

The Research Project: Theoretical Framing

The title of our research project – “Contact Zones” – refers not only to our subject but also to a specific approach. While contact zones refer to certain regions, they also describe primarily social spaces: i.e. constructs, where different cultures clash, collide, or maintain relationships with each other (Pratt 1991). Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of contact zones – originally developed in the context of post-colonial studies – not only considers equal relationships, but also asymmetrical or hierarchical relationships. It also takes into account the ongoing impact of exposure to political violence. James Clifford (1997) further developed this concept by using it to interpret museum situations and social contacts in differentiated modern societies. The idea of contact zones will be used within this project on transnational initiatives and activities in the German-Czech-Polish borderland (beyond regional administrative council administrators or political actors).

²Several studies have further diversified this cultural-memorial approach (Olick 1999, Olick, Robbins 1998, Assmann A. 1999). Aleida and Jan Assmann divide the collective memory into communicative and cultural memory, the communicative memory being the short-term resp. generational memory, referring to the nearest past that is negotiated in communicative processes: The image of history constituted through these memories and narratives is a ‘history of everyday life’.

This project focuses on current transnational phenomena by analyzing mutual processes influencing transnational cultural flows: the key aspect being the analysis of trans-border activities, (cultural) exchange and the demarcation of (cultural) difference. Using the examples of contacts e.g., cultural events, sporting events, and socio-political commitment, we will view such initiatives as structures and modes of action to be examined as contact zones in borderlands. The spectrum of events and initiatives will involve a wide range of players and projects: cultural associations, informal groups, or institutional (regional and local) projects of cultural and economic cooperation. Our main focus is on the question of how history and memory are constituted within these contact zones and how the representation of the present (time) is negotiated. Who “owns” sovereignty in interpretation (the power of definition)? What is the meaning (evocative power) of material or non-material artefacts of cultures of remembrance?

In the German-Czech borderland, contact zones do exist and constantly emerge anew, providing the basis for the mutual transfer of ideas, knowledge, and different cultures or various cultural practices. At the same time, the border region as a whole is a contact zone – not only as a geographical unit with a connecting and dividing history of events and common or differing cultural traditions, but also as a communicative entity in everyday life. The economic dimension of the spaces of action is a crucial momentum: In general, the Polish-Czech-German borderland is said to be a structurally weak region; it is, apart from its attraction to tourists, also characterized by truck transit, prostitution, and drug trafficking.

Therefore, promotional plans of the respective provincial or federal governments, and especially of the European Union, may give impulses to cross-border co-operation. This means that transnational activities derive (also) from initiatives coming from the “outside” or “above” and tend to be due to the economic situation more than a neighbourly interest in contacts. Furthermore, concepts of cultural memory interfere and melt into each other, but sometimes they are in competition with each other. Which effects, if any at all, do they have on everyday life, on transnational cultural activities, co-operations, or dissociations? This is another point that we shall analyse. Along with the analysis of the constitution of history, the present, and memories in the contact zones, we will also look at the factors that possibly shape and create identity. We will investigate their relations to the past on both sides of the border, and consequently, how recent history (or histories) is (are) currently dealing with these.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research design combines various methods. As contact zones are mainly constituted through communication, we will look at homepages of communities and institutions in the framework of a media analysis, concerning cross-border activities and innovative potential, as well as traditional discourses and images. More specifically, we will include (self-) representations in social media (e.g. Facebook) in order to take into account the scope and significance of (digital) media. In the near future, memories of historical events (like World War II) will be mainly passed on through media. Thus, identity is generated, among other factors, within “the context of a media and cultural field that is digitized and globalized” and therefore constitutes a “global memory field” (Reading 2011, p. 377). That is to say that the creation of new “national” identities refers to earlier “national memories that are reassembled and shared with new kinds of rapidity, extensity, and transmediality”. Consequently, we have to take into account the mediatized relationship between memory and identities (ibid.).

In addition, we will conduct about 20 expert interviews referring to cross-border activities. These qualitative, guided interviews put the subjective perspective of the actors into focus and reveal the individual motives, the approaches and the scopes of action of cross-border commitment. However, they also hint at what is not – or what is not – or what is just implicitly – expressed. Internal structures, decision processes, and processes within the contact zones, or within the initiatives committed to them, can be determined on this basis. This discloses the impact of external funding and structural programs on the transnational transfer of ideas, knowledge, and culture.

The reception of these offers will be collected on the basis of quantitative analysis on a wide scale survey. This approach allows a description of the attitude of a larger number of persons (e.g. in connection with their participation in activities), and then it allows the quantifying of statements in relation to the biographical data.

In addition, we will actively observe cross-border initiatives and activities: by doing this we hope to gain insights into participatory potential in the borderland as well as into individual practices of appropriation. Cross-border activities include, for example, the Neißer Filmfestival (Nisa Film Festival/Nisky Festiwal Filmowy), or the “Sächsisch-Böhmische Bierfest” (Saxon-Bohemian beer festival) of Bärenstein, which takes place at the joint centre of Bärenstein and Vejprty.

The Focus of Research

In the following, we would like to present some core themes of our research more closely. First, we are focusing on two border communities in the Czech-German border district (Bärenstein and Vejprty). They are only separated by a creek, but between 1945 and 1991 they were also separated by a national border without any possibility of crossing over. Although this special proximity has already given rise to a work on how historical events are dealt with in a local region (Scherer 2009), with our project we want to, in particular, bring the current transnational cooperation between the two communities into focus. So, for example, the Historical Association for the Preservation of Monuments, Weipert – a German association that is dedicated to the preservation of the traces of German and German-speaking peoples in Bohemia – works together with the Czech Historical Association Vejprty.

Here it is key that the borders – for the Germans interviewed up to now – are no longer conspicuous, and it is even a matter of course that they can be routinely crossed-over. Simultaneously things are organized (for legal reasons of course) along these formal dividing lines which play a large role in the differentiations and attributions between ‘here’ and ‘there.’ The borders are therefore relevant and are thought of in terms of ‘German and Czech’ and less in reference to tourists or migrants in the region in their respect to statehood. However refugees and “gypsies” are relevant to ethno-graphic discussion. Their presence in the border area appears to be worthy of serious discussion.

Furthermore, the desire to work together and the tranquility on the border area is remarkable. Despite the yearning perspectives from the German side for Weipert, that previously held a lot of Germans, (that, among other things, can be seen in the artistic design of the public circular trails around the Bärenstein mountain – there, for example, a wooden bench can be found where, when seated, one looks eastwards and in which the words “view over Weipert” are etched in) there is no serious political attempt at border revision or any serious attempt to change the current reality. On the contrary, there are even joint projects between the neighboring communities.



Figure 3. View from the wooden bench over Vejprty (Weipert).
Source: Sarah Kleinmann, 2016.



Figure 4. Wooden bench "view over Weipert".
Source: Sarah Kleinmann, 2016.

Interestingly, when talking with Germans there, one could almost get the impression that Weipert had always belonged to Germany. In fact, the community was actually a part of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy and then it became part of the first Czechoslovakian Republic in 1918 until October 1938 when German troops marched in. The effects that this violent history have left behind here is the topic of this research.

In 2013, the communities received a joint centre, the “Gemeinsame Mitte Bärenstein/Vejprty.“ This new town centre is meant to, as was the intention of the EU-sponsored project, provide a space for meetings and exchanges, as well as for providing tourist information. We will explore how Czech and German inhabitants experience this specially constructed transnational space. The tourist potential of this region is also supposed to be enhanced by cross-border activities. Here, using the above example, motivations for and impediments against such initiatives can be studied. What is already evident is that, despite great interest, there are barriers to contacts and cooperation: it is not only a lack of linguistic understanding but also the different economic situations of the German-Polish and German-Czech border. For example, it is much more expensive for people from the Czech Republic to join cultural events in Germany than vice versa. In any case, the confrontational history of the 20th century still plays a role, and recently the European disagreement towards the handling of the refugee crisis has also played a role.

Secondly, we have put our focus on the city of Zittau, which is located at the border of Saxony with Poland and the Czech Republic. For it is located at the so-called 3-country-corner (*Dreiländereck*), Zittau is pre-destined to be an ideal city to study concrete examples of transnational activity. Here, it is true that the initiatives tend to be much more strongly oriented towards the Czech Republic – e.g. due to its proximity to Bohemia – than towards its Polish neighbor.

Thirdly, we are interested in an analysis of social media. In this case, it is the mechanisms of the boundaries and affiliation definitions in the internet that most concern us. Along with this is the question of how the border regions are (re-)produced in their historicity in the internet. This basic substance forms, among other things, the homepages of transnationally active groupings with respect to the German-Czech-Polish border regions, as well as the private posts on Facebook pages for corresponding initiatives. In general, borders in virtual space will be a continuous point of discussion: essentially in reference to claims for openings or closings (of borders), as well as in the recourse towards national stereotypes based upon experiences in the border area. Comments found on Facebook offer, for example,

insights into group-related communication, in circulating various interpretations of borders, as well as dominant views of history and their relationship to the present.

“zaniklár” – the Vanished Ones³

The following example introduces a private Czech initiative. Today, the villages that disappeared, or were destroyed and damaged, where mainly Germans had lived until World War II, belong to the landscape of the Czech border region. They are overgrown and/or are in ruins. These places, or non-places (cf. Augé 1994), illustrate the layers of the past that have inscribed themselves into the landscape. They bear witness to German-Czech history and its later reception. After the “Velvet Revolution” in 1989, they became destinations for a new excursion culture: students from the University of Ústí nad Labem, for example, developed a hiking tour alongside the vanished villages in the Bohemian low mountain range (Zanikle obce 2009). Also, outside the academic context, there was a need to explain the present historically. A group of people interested in this topic named themselves the “zaniklár” (a new terminological creation). They search for traces of the past and try to make them readable for others. Roads have been rendered accessible again and older German texts on the area have been re-published. In this context social media plays a significant role: in the region of northern Bohemia, it is mainly websites that deal with the now invisible – mainly in reference to architectural structures (<http://zanikleobce.cz>, <http://usti-aussig.net>). Interview-based research will allow us to trace the motives and the objectives of this voluntary memory work. Through participating in these events (such as the hiking tour) and through the analysis of websites or letters to the editor, the effect and the scope of activities like those of the zaniklár will be observed and detailed.

Expected Outcomes

After the analysis, the data will be accessible to comparable studies on the online portal “*Lebensgeschichtliches Archiv*” at the ISGV. Apart from documenting results in the form of conventional academic lectures and articles, we are looking for ways to communicate results to a broader public. For example, a tri-lingual website will be designed to present the project, offering a virtual “map” of the initiatives. It is intended to provide an exchange forum for all users. Furthermore, we plan a scenic reading (or a documentary drama). In this type of event, interview sequences could be contrasted with medial presentations, and thus a multi-perspective image of the contact zones in the borderland could be given. This participative

³“zaniknout“ (cz.): to vanish.

approach makes it possible to involve the actors into the communication as well, and thus re-link the research results to the research field (cf. Löneke, Spieker 2014). Furthermore, methodological and theoretical approaches, as well as epistemological questions and (interim) results, will be discussed at an interdisciplinary workshop in Hellerau – at European Center for the Arts Dresden in November 2016. With these various forms of presentation of our data we are trying to break the borders of representation. In this sense we aim at producing new contact zones from our results.

Last but not least, an important remark: In the future, we will certainly have to reconsider and broaden our concepts due to the changes in the borderland. The humanitarian disaster in Europe and the Middle East, that is forcing so many human beings to flee their homelands, has also affected our work. It will shape the structure of these regions, the social contacts, and the mentality of the population. Let us hope that the results of our study can give a positive contribution to mutual understanding, respect, tolerance and inter-cultural exchange, for good connections in this borderland in the heart of Europe that has seen so many wars and armed conflicts.

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Keywords: contact zones, remembrance, Polish-Czech-German border region, World War II, Cultural Anthropology.

This article results from a research project recently started at the Institute of Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology (Dresden) which aims to analyse “contact zones” in the Polish-Czech-German Border Region. It gives an insight into the work programme, discusses the methodological approach and presents some interim results. The time frame for the cultural-anthropological research project is set with reference to historical developments in these borderlands since World War II. The core questions of the project are how representations and functions of commemorative culture are performed and how the past and the present are negotiated in the border regions: How do people cope with their own past and the official representation of history? Which consequences are still visible today, after Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland became EU-members? What kind of new impulses have been derived from those mostly young residents who have chosen the border regions as their home today? How does transnational cooperation work in this context? The thesis is that there are many cross-border activities as well as many obstacles that hinder cooperation.