

6th European Historical Forum

## **The Epochal Year 1917: The Dream - or Nightmare - of Emancipation? Flashback to a Caesura in Eastern and Southeastern Europe**

It has become a sort of tradition at the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Berlin: once every year, an international group of historians, sociologists, media and cultural figures, and representatives from non-governmental organisations convene at the politically Green foundation in order to speak together at the European Historical Forum. The conference, held in cooperation with the Russian scientific information centre Memorial, was held for the sixth time on 22 and 23 May.

The participants in the public event have always formed a mixed group. This is because the forum is directed toward everyone who has a professional, volunteer-based, or personal interest in the history of the 20th century.

This time the participants at the Historical Forum will take a look 100 years into the past. What were the general goings-on around the world, and on the European continent in particular? And how do events from that time continue to shape our world today?

The First World War dominated current events in 1917. The USA's entry into the war in April of that year marked its ascent into the role of peacekeeper in Europe. In January of 1918, US President Woodrow Wilson propagated the principle of national self-determination and the idea of international law as a foundation of international relations as part of his Fourteen Points Plan. The League of Nations founded after the First World War made the first attempt at institutionalising these ideas. The fall of tsarist rule in Russia in February 1917, and the takeover of power by the Bolsheviks that same year, also had ramifications for all of Europe. The revolution itself first took place as a liberation from authoritarian rule, with hope for progress, justice, and national self-determination. Yet with the Bolshevik option of "workers' and peasants' rights", a small revolutionary avant-garde formed in Russia with Lenin as its leader and which claimed all political, economic, and military resources of power.

The year 1917 ultimately resulted in a geographical fault line between two different perceptions of national sovereignty: the liberal-democratic view with its constitutional institutions in the West, and the communist cadre party's claim to leadership, legitimised by plebiscite, in the East.

### **Promoting critical, scientific, and public discourse**

Participants were welcomed by *Walter Kaufmann*, the host of the sixth Historical Forum and Director of the Eastern and Southeastern Europe Department of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, and *Irina Sherbakova*, co-founder of the human rights organisation Memorial. Both emphasised the importance of dialogue at a time when history is once again being used to legitimise war and propaganda. "The forum has not lost its relevance in recent years," said Irina Sherbakova. "Because the history of the 20th century still has its hold on us."

Walter Kaufmann once more highlighted the conference's objective, saying that it is not only about presenting the current state of research, but also about promoting critical, scientific, and public discourse. Recognising one's own perspective of history, discussing it and contributing it to international discussions with other perspectives, is the purpose of the series of events, he says.

## **How the Bolshevik seizure of power continues to shape our world**

Historian and publicist *Gerd Koenen* led the conference with an introductory presentation entitled "In the Circle of History? How the Bolshevik Seizure of Power Has Shaped Our World", thereby firing a successful starting shot to the two-day discussion of the epochal year 2017.

"What kind of Russia did we have at the time?" asked Gerd Koenen at the outset. He said that the country had a distinct middle class, a distinct working class, and the people were very young. He went on to say that a large civil society movement had been developing since 1891. In 1905 the people's discontent resulted in one of the first revolutionary upheavals. "Hundreds of thousands were on strike for months, they mutinied, new newspapers came out, and the threshold of censorship was crossed." However, the Tsar brutally suppressed the revolution. "Nothing was solved. Russia was stuck in a developmental crisis."

Similar occurrences happened in February 1917. This time they belonged to a series of events which had already ousted governments in Turkey, China, and Iran around that time. "It was, you could say, a wave of Eurasian revolutions." But none of them can be compared with Russia's, he says.

After the fall of the tsarist government, a provisional government was appointed in St. Petersburg: on the left sat the workers' council, on the right the provisional government of liberal, bourgeois reformers, socialists, and social revolutionaries. "Lenin referred to this rule as a double-government, when in fact there was none." Until September-October 1917 both sides had cooperated, emphasised Gerd Koenen. A new, progressive constitution had even been drafted for the country.

But Lenin wanted to know nothing of these developments, which in itself confused his fellow party members. He considered the provisional government a form of treason. It must be combated, he demanded. "Lenin was always the voice of the minority, always asserted himself, which is hard for historians to comprehend."

When the Bolsheviks came to power in November 1917 Lenin pursued only one goal. "His eyes were always on absolute, total power," said Gerd Koenen. "In this sense one could actually say that he was the founder of political totalitarianism in the 20th century." A form of rule that aimed to shape all human relationships, down to thought itself. "Society was to be entirely reshaped, which in this case seems completely impossible, an absurd undertaking, because it was directed against a large section of society." But the war allowed for it.

After the Treaty of Versailles the Bolsheviks' world view was as follows: "The world has become divided into victorious powers who will later be referred to as the Western powers, and a large, oppressed world, to which Germany also belongs." The Bolsheviks fostered a special economic relationship with the Weimar Republic, as verified in the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922; cooperation with the German army continued until 1933 - "a conspiratorial cooperation in which all modern weaponry systems that clashed during the Second World War were developed. It was no triviality, this cooperation." Only through Hitler's pact with Poland was there an about-face in Bolshevik policy. A brief phase of anti-fascism set in. Before, said Koenen, the game with the fascist powers continued, despite the imprisonment of communists.

The true socialism that was later established in the Soviet Union had the essential features of a war economy, until its collapse in 1989, said Gerd Koenen. "That was the most constant characteristic." All communist powers were "capable of extraordinary expansion of military power, but as good as no civil social or civil economic growth." This path through the century provides food for thought for

the modern day.

## **How does Russia remember the events of 1917?**

For many decades, children in Eastern and Southeastern Europe were taught to remember 1917 as the beginning of the great liberation that freed people around the world from social and national oppression. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the heroic forced memory of old has become a heterogeneous mix of condemnation, repression, or partial usurpation. Which events from 1917 are now actively remembered, and which are suppressed? Which interpretation dominates the official version of history? These were the questions that *Boris Kolonitsky* - a historian from St. Petersburg - and *Elena Rozhdestvenskaya* - a sociologist from Moscow - answered following Gerd Koenen's opening presentation.

In 2007 the Russian Revolution was remembered with a large state ceremony, said Boris Kolonitsky. In 2017, however, he is not sure where the journey is heading. He does not expect any major results. But from a historical and political perspective nothing in Russia is as unpredictable as the past.

Polls show a prevailing disinterest in the topic among the population. However, everybody also has a strong opinion on the topic. There have been few new publications, merely some events and exhibitions, said Kolonitsky. And one of his predictions - namely that conspiracy theories would spread - has come true. Greater political initiatives never materialised. While the Russian Ministry of Culture did conceive the idea of a "memorial for national reconciliation", it continues to lack the funds, said Kolonitsky. It is questionable whether it will actually be realised by the Kremlin. Overall he has the impression that the government wishes for the year 2017 to be over as quickly as possible.

What he did not foresee was the criticism of the Revolution from the Russian Orthodox Church. He did not expect new historical projects, such as the "Project 1917. Free History". The online portal primarily directed toward young people, and which explains history via multimedia, was presented in further detail throughout the Historical Forum by publicist and editor *Andrey Borzenko*. He explained it as an attempt at presenting historical processes in a different light, going to places that are very popular among young people. This means social networks. Tweets and posts - on Facebook, V Kontakte, Twitter, and Instagram - are the daily reality of Project 1917, which has been online at <https://project1917.com> since 2016.

With Elena Rozhdestvenskaya's report on the political and social role of women in Russia today and one hundred years ago, the retrospective of the Revolution was expanded by the dimension of gender. The Revolution in February 1917 was directly related to feminist demands for emancipation as well. On 8 March 1917 - or 23 February in the old Julian calendar - textile workers from Vyborg called a strike in Petrograd, now known as St. Petersburg. They initiated progressive actions, and for a time abortion was legal, divorce was possible, and women were free to choose their spouse. They demanded full education and voting rights for women. In the later Soviet Union women were equal to men in terms of education and profession, although they were largely left out of relevant political decision-making processes. In the Soviet Union, the traditional allocation of roles in the household was never questioned, resulting in twice the strain and overwork on the part of women.

She now see neo-conservative developments taking place in Russian society. The 8th of March, which was named "International Women's Day" in the early 1920s, has since the Soviet era become merely a sort of Mother's Day, with words of love and flowers. No longer does anybody think back to the women workers' political strike on 8 March 1917.

## **Interpretation of the year of the Revolution in Eastern and South-eastern Europe**

At the end of the First World War the Russian and Ottoman Empires collapsed, and the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy was dissolved. The dream of social liberation was displaced many times over by the endeavour for national self-determination, stirred by both the Russian Revolution and the theses of American President Woodrow Wilson. In Eastern and South-eastern Europe many countries underwent pervasive upheaval, resulting in various attempts at a new order.

### **I - A glance at Georgia**

What ideas prevailed in Georgia in 1917? What events were occurring there? Political scientist *Levan Lortkipanidze* and historian *Beka Kobakhidze*, both from Tbilisi, outlined the events of that time and their ramifications today.

The February Revolution of 1917 in Russia also brought an end to tsarist rule in Georgia. This was followed by a brief period of emancipation, although little is remembered of this today, said Levan Lortkipanidze. Georgia declared independence on 26 May 1918, yet the young state - the Democratic Republic of Georgia - was not long-lived. Three years later it was occupied and destroyed by the Red Army.

Yet there was a series of progressive developments during the brief period of independence: free elections were held, in which women were allowed to participate alongside men. The social-democratic Menshevik government, elected with a large majority, introduced various reforms, including implementation of the minimum wage, pension funds, unemployment benefits, and the eight-hour working day. "Workers and college employees received the same wages," said Beka Kobakhidze.

Since 2010 there have been a number of separate movements in Georgia demanding that this part of history cannot be forgotten, said Levan Lortkipanidze. However, the Soviet past continues to dominate the foreground.

### **II – A glance at Ukraine**

In his presentation *Andrii Portnov*, a historian from Dnipro living in Berlin, took on the daunting task of describing developments in Ukraine from 1917 to the early 1920s. Portnov recalled that at the time Ukraine was divided between two different empires - the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian. The so-called Ukrainian Revolution occurred on both sides between 1917 and 1921.

In the western portion it resulted in the proclamation of the West Ukrainian People's Republic in 1918. In the east, however, there were multiple changes of power in a very short time, along with various political projects at local level. Anarchist people's movements that had large armies at their disposal fought against one another. They were very heavily influenced by socialist and nationalist ideals, said Portnov. However, there was no cohesive idea of what an independent Ukraine could look like. Rather, they saw Ukraine as autonomous, but still a part of Russia.

There were at least three large state-like entities in East Ukraine in 1918 alone: the Ukrainian People's Republic in Kiev, which was declared independent by the Tsentralna Rada in January; the Hetman Skoropadskyi regime, which came to power in Kiev in April following a putsch; and the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in Kharkiv.

The seizure of Kiev by the Bolsheviks in January 1919 was followed by the proclamation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Although all Ukrainian projects had thus lost the fight against Soviet power - some went into exile, others were murdered or imprisoned - Ukraine was at least recognised for the first time. "The borders were recognised for the first time, along with the Ukrainian language and literature. It's a sort of paradox," said Andrii Portnov.

### III – A glance at the Balkans

*Srdjan Milosevic*, a historian from Belgrade, *Petar Todorov*, a historian from Skopje, and *Amir Duranovic*, a historian from Sarajevo, jointly shed light on the effects of the Russian Revolution and the First World War on the Balkan region.

In a brief overview Srdjan Milosevic traced the founding of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918. It was a monarchy led by Serbia. All processes were dictated from Belgrade, and the multinational state - also known as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes - had a federalist structure that nobody had intended, he argued. Support for this form of Serbian Orthodox-dominated state-building came primarily from tsarist Russia, with which a special relationship was formed even after the Revolution, which modern Serbia still willingly maintains. For example, on the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War in 2014, a memorial for Tsar Nicholas II was erected in Belgrade. "I believe it is the largest of its kind outside of Russia," said Milosevic.

In his following presentation Petar Todorov addressed the culture of memory in Macedonia with regard to the First World War. There is no political interest in reappraising history. Rather, the war is portrayed as a catastrophe for the Macedonian people, who fell victim to its events. "The myth of the victim is emphasised," said Petar Todorov. Historical events were polished and not sufficiently analysed. Macedonian historical narrative is instead seen through an ethnic prism, which omits the complexity of history. "We need a new start for Macedonia," Petar Todorov demanded.

Amir Duranovic rounded off the Balkan discussion of the Historical Forum by looking at Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was first part of the Ottoman Empire and then of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as of 1878. The Austro-Hungarian government sought to establish a pluralistic, multi-confessional Bosnian nation, although this project was not realised. This is because, as of 1918, Bosnia-Herzegovina belonged to the Serb-governed Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Every substantial ethnic group - be they Muslim Bosniaks, Serbs, or Croats - were represented by their own party.

One hundred years later, he said, little has changed: the party landscape has become even more complex and every ethnic group claims their own view of Bosnia-Herzegovina. "The debates from 1917 and 2017 remain similar to this day," said Amir Duranovic. "It appears as though nothing has been learned from the past."

### **Closing discussion and outlook**

At the close of the conference the room was asked what conclusions could be drawn from the presentations and discussions that had been heard. One such conclusion must be the unchanged relationship between smaller nations and world powers, said *Andreas Poltermann*, who led the Belgrade office of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung until 2016. If smaller nations wish to emancipate themselves, there was always another, second world power which supported them in their efforts. Poltermann felt this was necessary, because national emancipation could not be realised without an international framework or guaranteed order. The European Union had been a very successful attempt

at offering such an international legal framework for balancing national emancipation and an international coordination of interests.

He looked with worry at recent developments in the USA, which may be withdrawing from the existing order and asserting an "America first" policy. This was not good news for small countries, nor in this sense for Germany either, which had been able to grow positively under liberal conditions. The USA wanted to return to a balance of world powers, and thus had no qualms about a Russia that identified with the 19th century, said Poltermann.

*Irina Sherbakova* from Memorial called for a further development. History must be "renormalised" and become a science, she said. "Everybody has an opinion on history, and that in itself is an almost tragic development." This is because history is not about opinions, but rather recognising cause, effect, and context. This is an aspect, said Sherbakova, that will surely be addressed once more at the next Historical Forum in May 2018.

### **Appendix: Excursions**

As in past years, three excursions were held during the European Historical Forum. The theoretical deliberations rounded off the programme. One group visited the "Socialist Cemetery" in Berlin-Friedrichsfelde with Berlin historian *Jürgen Hofmann*. Another group visited the Deutsches Historisches Museum, where they were met by consultant *Michael Adam* who toured them through the museum, with a special focus on the 1917 Russian Revolution and its effects on Germany. Political and cultural scientist *Andrei Tchernodarov* taught the third excursion group about the biographical traces of the era of the Revolution and the Golden 1920s in Charlottenburg.

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