

Eastern European Studies: The Situation in Germany

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The study of and research on Eastern Europe has a long tradition in Germany. Already in the 18th century and within the context of Romantic ideas, German philologists interested themselves in southeastern European languages. From the 19th century onward, there was a special interest in Russian affairs, because of geographical proximity and because of the relations between Germany and Russia in many diverse fields. German universities established chairs in the Slavonic languages and Eastern European history, and thus Germany became the leading nation in research on Eastern Europe before the First World War.

This situation continued between the two World Wars. German scholars were leading in Eastern European Studies, and there even was a certain scientific exchange between Germany and the Soviet Union in the early 1920s when the USSR had only very little contact with other countries. Until that time, German was the main scientific language in Eastern European countries, a condition which further reinforced the mutual affinity. Because of the shared border with the re-established Polish state, and because of the many people who were able to speak both languages, Polish and German, there was a special interest in Polish studies as well. A similar phenomenon can be observed with regard to the Baltic States and Czechoslovakia. One reason for this widespread interest in all these countries is that there were minorities of ethnic Germans in each of them.

The situation changed rapidly after 1933, when the Nazi regime was not interested anymore in the research on the Eastern European countries, because the eastern culture(s) were regarded as being of minor value. Most of the respective institutions were closed, and the well-known journal 'Osteuropa', which had been published since 1925, had to cease publication.

After the Second World War, the study of Eastern Europe (and especially of the Soviet Union) was stimulated in the GDR, but, as it is known, could not develop in a neutral way. In West Germany, the former scientific tradition was taken up again, but it was enlarged by a new aspect, the so-called 'Feindbeobachtung', i.e. observation of the enemy. The ideological controversy between Eastern and Western Europe determined the research on Eastern Europe to a high degree. At the time, it was quite difficult (and sometimes even impossible) to access Eastern European archives and to have normal scientific communication with colleagues from the respective countries.

Nevertheless, the significance of Eastern European Studies in Germany remained great, and in many areas German specialists counted among the leading researchers. The growing exchange within the international (Western) scientific community contributed to such a development. German scholars came into closer contact with colleagues in other European countries and in the

USA, as well as with the Slavic Research Center in Sapporo, and the mutual exchange stimulated further research and common projects. Additionally, after the Second World War, many emigrants from the countries which were then under Communist regimes came to the West and frequently enlarged Western knowledge of their countries. This phenomenon, however, did not play as important a role in Germany as, for instance, in the United States.

A final and very deep change in the situation took place after 1989/1990. The decline of the Communist regimes had far-reaching consequences for Eastern European research in Germany. Firstly, there seemed to be no further need for any research on these countries, because they were now 'democratic' and belonged to the 'Western World'. Such a view was held mostly by politicians who doubted the role of research on Eastern Europe, especially because of the 'mistake' of the specialists not to foresee the break-down of the Eastern Bloc. To them, it seemed to be just a matter of time when the political and economical transformation would succeed in making the Eastern European countries wealthy democracies of the western type. Secondly, the ideological gap vanished, and there was no more military threat. Thirdly, the political changes happened at a time when state authorities had less and less money for financing research.

One has to add that scientific research is, traditionally, financed by the state in Germany. Until the political changes in Central-Eastern Europe, the state and politicians had an interest in financing Eastern European research because of the political situation. After the breakdown of Communism, this interest disappeared, and alongside a more and more difficult economic situation, chairs and institutions for Eastern European research were cut. These institutions as well as individuals have now to approach foundations and other funding agencies for money. The state-financed institutions were threatened with closure, and at universities, more and more chairs were not renewed after a professor retired, if not rededicated into chairs for other (entirely different) subjects. In the last few years, this development became worse and worse. A survey conducted by the German Association for Eastern European Studies shows that most institutions for Eastern European Studies suffered relevant shortages of their finances and staff. An increase of such shortages is to be expected. At the same time, these institutions try to get money for their research by non-state funding agencies, but since there is no such tradition in Germany, especially not for the humanities, it is quite difficult to succeed in this endeavour.

The situation has consequences in different fields. Because of the shortages, fewer post-graduates get the opportunity of attaining a position in order to continue their research and to gain a PhD. In the departments for the Slavonic languages, there is a concentration on the main languages (Russian and Polish); other languages (Bulgarian, Albanian, and Belorussian) can only be studied at a very few universities. Additionally, students are urged to complete their studies in a relatively short time and thus cannot achieve the level of language proficiency which is necessary for regional studies. A third

consequence is the lack of perspective for working in one's own profession in the future, which is getting worse and worse. For graduates, it is quite hard to find an adequate job in which their knowledge about Eastern Europe is of any worth.

This development can be observed in all disciplines, with a certain exception of Eastern European history, where the number of chairs has hardly changed at all until now (but probably will within the next few years). However, especially in political sciences and economics, the loss of chairs is significant. The same situation is to be observed for non-university research institutions. The famous BIOST (formerly in Cologne) has been merged with the SWP foundation, so that of the 35 scholars working in these two institutions on East European issues in 1988, only 16 remain in 2001. A similar observation can be made concerning Osteuropa Institut in Berlin. In 1980, there were 31 professors for Eastern European Studies, today we have just four.

A last issue, which should be mentioned, is the debate about the relationship between regional studies (Eastern European studies) and the 'mother disciplines'. Will Eastern European history just be (or become) a part of general history, and political analysis of Eastern Europe just a part of general political science? There is a lively debate on this question going on in Germany, but it still remains unsettled. The possible answers concern not only the structure of research institutions (special regional departments vs. research on Eastern Europe in the respective departments and faculties of the 'mother disciplines'), but also questions of methodology and of approach.

These are some of the main problems of Eastern European Studies in Germany today. In a way, they may be similar to the situation in other countries, but, due to the old tradition of Eastern European Studies in Germany, these problems hit the scientific community very hard.