

III European Congress on Universal and Global History: "Area Studies in the Soviet Union: Actors, Entanglements and Paradigms"

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Area Studies, as a specifically institutionalized form of producing knowledge about the world, its different regions and the entanglements between them, have played a particular role especially in the second half of 20th century, contributing to the understanding of global processes and generating knowledge of specific significance in the context of the Cold War rivalry between two competing political systems. After 1989 they have been subject to considerable criticism addressing both the categories and epistemologies developed by area studies questioned as Eurocentric and the alleged instrumentalization of area studies for political and ideological means.

This debate has mostly been focused on Western area studies, while astonishingly the field in Eastern Europe has been rarely investigated since 1989, with the Soviet Union being no exception.

In contrast it shall be argued, that the question of how this specific kind of knowledge was produced and how it was integrated into larger political and scientific frameworks in Eastern Europe, especially in the Soviet Union must not be marginalized. The history of area studies cannot be understood without taking into account the counterparts on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Additionally, investigating the history of area studies in the Soviet Union can offer insights into how processes of an intensifying globalization were shaped by actors and societies on the Eastern side of the Berlin Wall.

There have been recent but nascent attempts to historicize the production of area studies knowledge as well as the entanglement of the socialist humanities and social sciences with world regions such as Africa and Latin America especially for the Soviet Union. Often rooted in a longer tradition of Oriental studies in the late 19th and early 20th century, first attempts to intensify area studies research were developed in the context of ComIntern activities and gained considerable momentum in the 1950s and 1960s, with the process of decolonization in Africa and Asia triggering intensive public and political interest all over the world. Looking for scientific and political models for the new international situation, area studies – not only in the Soviet Union - were fulfilling important functions such as providing information, legitimizing and theorizing alternative development paths and assisting in the establishment of relations between the newly independent countries and the Socialist world. In the 1970s and 1980s their status changed in a period often characterized as stagnation. Yet, the development of Area Studies in the Soviet Union cannot be reduced to their history during the Cold War, but should be interpreted against a complex background of a longer history of the disciplines included as well as early of previous institutionalization.

Proposals for this panel are invited which will address the history of area studies such as African and Oriental studies in the Soviet Union with special attention to the 20th century, thus contributing to the history of science in the Cold War era and addressing the question of how knowledge became framed and territorialized in the context of a bipolar but at the same time ever integrating world.

Key issues could be:

1. Which paradigms, methodologies and concepts have been developed in the USSR to describe and explain a changing world order? Which narratives and theories have been developed to

analyze development and modernization processes - also in contrast or in competition to proposals made by Western scholars? How had these been rooted in a longer tradition of area studies before the First world war?

2. Which actors and institutions participated in the process of knowledge production and how was this integrated into a larger social and political context?

3. Which kind of entanglements between the Soviet Union and other world regions such Africa, Latin America, Asia have been established and how did these encounters challenge assumptions and narratives developed in Eastern and Central Europe? Which role did Soviet institutions and scholars play in the formation of the larger field of area studies in Eastern and Central Europe as a whole?

Abstracts of 300-500 words shall be sent to:

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Deadline for application is 31 July 2010.

Conference languages are English, French and German, presentations in Russian might be negotiated with the conference organizers.

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