
At Home: Jews and Muslims in Eastern Europe

Workshop am 28. und 29. Juni 2018, Berlin.

In Kooperation mit dem Forschungsverbund „Prisma Ukraïna“ am Forum Transregionale Studien.

On 28–29 June 2018, Prisma Ukraïna and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Osteuropakunde conducted a workshop titled “At Home: Jews and Muslims in Eastern Europe” at Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin. The title of the event makes an important point: contrary to the assumptions of many laypeople, both Jews and Muslims are no foreign “Others”, but they are actually native to Europe and particularly rooted in its eastern regions. At the same time, Judaism and Islam are major religious denominations that cannot be easily confined to a bounded space, which opens up the discussion about the conflict between feelings of affiliation and belonging on a local but also a global scale. After all, religions are differently interpreted and practiced from place to place and there is a potential for these differences to clash. In some instances, religious identification may involve the acquisition of characteristics that are more typical for other kinds of identity. We might then be talking about gradations of identity expressed predominantly in ethnic or national terms at one end of the scale and in religious terms at the other end. In the perception of the author of these paragraphs here, this discussion constituted a link—at times implicit, then again explicit—between many of the papers from the workshop programme.

Take for instance the presentation of Harun BULJINA (Columbia University) about the Bosnian journal “Biser” from the early 20th century. The Muslim reformist editors and authors of the publication entertained connections well beyond the borders of the state. Some of them were educated in Istanbul, while the network also extended to Vienna and other cities, which placed the journal somewhere in between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. As pan-Islamism was a forceful idea to emerge in this period, the political aims inspired by these tendencies were conceived as an alternative to national projects. Buljina stressed, however, that pan-Islamism did not cause ethnic dimensions to completely disappear from the utopian visions of the editors. As a reaction to the paper, keynote speaker Armina OMERIKA (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt), who delivered a lecture on the turns of modern Muslim history in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, cautioned Buljina to be careful when using categories of religion and culture, as one cannot say with certainty if contributors to the journal moved mostly in religious or cultural circles. Mansur GAZIMZYANOV (European University St. Petersburg) likewise pointed to the fluid boundaries of religion and culture by asking how the people writing for “Biser” understood the term “journalist” and how this understanding relates to the Islamic tradition of writing. Thomas LOY (Humboldt University Berlin) drew a comparison with the Central Asian publication “Oyna” and mentioned the role these journals played in the creation of new ethnic and national identities. Regarding the emerging public spheres, Omerika wondered to what

degree certain ideas were shared in different parts of the world. Would this allow us to speak of a “Muslim world”, she asked, and what does such a term entail? With her presentation about a Jewish newspaper from Lviv, Olha KOLESNYK (University of Warsaw) also contributed to the discussion about the printing press and questions of identity. Viktoria VENHERSKA (Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University) instead looked into the diffusion of modern ideologies among Jews before the Russian Revolution.

The conflict between local and global identifications becomes furthermore apparent in the conversation around religious pilgrimage. Observant Jews and Muslims are expected to go on pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca respectively, but this does not mean that local sites of veneration would lie dormant. In his keynote lecture about the Jewish and Muslim experience in Russia, Yohanan PETROVSKY-SHTERN (Northwestern University in Evanston and Chicago) raised the question in how far the Muslim pilgrimage to shrines in Samarkand and Bukhara in the 18th and 19th centuries suggests that the pilgrims did not regard themselves as part of a global ummah. Here, Georges KHALIL remarked that local pilgrimage is a widespread phenomenon in Africa and South Asia as well and might not be that special after all. In his own presentation about the boundaries of the Islamic and un-Islamic in the Soviet Union, Gazimzyanov reflected upon the state policy against visiting holy places in Central Asia for religious purposes. To some degree, these circumstances were an outcome of a growing influence of Muslim fundamentalist currents, whose proponents were convinced of their universal validity. The fact that such an influence would make itself felt even in the Soviet Union is not without irony.

When speaking about identity and belonging beyond the immediate local community, one does not get around taking into account the politics of states. And some of these policies still exert an influence on society long after they came to an end. In the same sense, Rozaliya GARIPPOVA (Nazarbayev University), with her paper on the impact of Russian legal culture on sharia among Volga-Ural Muslims, attempted to clarify how the state affects everyday religious life. In a way, her approach differs from those of other historians in the field, such as Robert Crews and Michael Kemper, who detected situations where the state and Muslim populations are cooperating and where Muslims with their religious discourses are relatively isolated from the state. A real discussion about empire was triggered by the presentation of Daria VASYUTINSKY SHAPIRA (Ben Gurion University of the Negev) on the beginnings of Russian Oriental and Jewish Studies. In Shapira's account, Orientalists of Slavic Russian origin and their ethnic minority research subjects would meet on middle ground and it was possible for natives to learn from the Russian Empire, while representatives of that empire would adopt native traditions. Several workshop participants asked for a more critical engagement with empire and its techniques of subjugation. Diliara BRILEVA (Kazan Federal University) and Galina ZELENINA (University of Bremen) attended to the publicly demonstrated loyalty of different religious communities to the Russian state, which might also be a consequence of their awareness as vulnerable minorities. The focus of Brileva was on the concept of “traditional Islam” in the Republic of Tatarstan, whereas Zelenina spoke about the embrace of conservative values by members of the Chabad Lubavitch movement. Lili DI PUPPO (NRU Higher School of Economics, Moscow) and Jesko SCHMOLLER (Perm State University, European University St. Petersburg) addressed the negotiation of Sufism's visibility in the state-approved image of Islam in Russia.

For obvious reasons, only a small number of presenters tried to bridge the gap in the discussion about Jewish and Muslim identity. An example would be Thomas Loy with his paper on the Chala, former Bukharan Jews who had officially converted to Islam but preserved their

Jewish traditions in secret. Their condition of being in-between established religious categories represents an exciting case for analysis. In contrast, Zeev LEVIN (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) talked about the impact of Russian civic legislation on the lives of Muslims and Jews in the Caucasus and Central Asia. When setting out on his comparative undertaking, the above-mentioned Petrovsky-Shtern found that the Jews and Muslims of Russia took very different trajectories through history. Vladimir LEVIN (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) likewise concluded that similarities between the Russian Empire's treatment of the Jewish and the Muslim minorities are rather superficial.

Even though most of the papers addressed either Muslim or Jewish issues, it turned out to be both appropriate and constructive to discuss them together. The atmosphere at the workshop was open and friendly, allowing for a lively exchange on the matters at hand. To lay the foundations for future events going in the same thematic direction, the workshop format has to be recognised as ideal. On the next occasion, the participants might be encouraged to move from their empirics further into theoretical terrain. It would be exciting, for instance, to inquire how Jewish and Muslim identities in Eastern Europe relate to concepts of race, ethnicity or space.

Jesko Schmoller, Workshop Report: "At Home: Jews and Muslims in Eastern Europe", in: TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research, 28.09.2018, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/13398>.