

Social Memory and the Post-Imperial Russian Heritage in Poland

The project focuses on the social processes of dealing with the post-imperial Russian heritage in Poland in the context of two different socio-political systems: communism and post-communism. I am going to investigate how the heritage associated with the times when parts of Poland were under the rule of the Russian Tsarist empire was protected, silenced, (re)interpreted and (re)used during communist and post-communist times, and how the memory of Russian Tsarist past is becoming the subject of contemporary social practices in local communities.

After the political transformation in the countries of East-Central Europe, the issues of communist heritage, the heritage connected with ethnic diversity as well as the changes in social memory were extensively researched. In Poland, a formerly multi-ethnic country with territories that used to be parts of different European empires and borders that changed significantly after World War II, several significant research projects were conducted on the heritage of different national groups (especially Germans and Jews) and on the heritage of communist times. Still, the tangible heritage of imperial Russia remains understudied within memory and heritage studies. To fill this gap, I am going to investigate social practices regarding the post-imperial heritage of Tsarist Russia in five Polish cities and towns: 1) Warsaw – the capital city and the westernmost metropolis of the Russian empire, which went through modernisation during the Russian rule and which nowadays is the place of many national commemorations while the Russian heritage in the city is generally silenced; 2) Łódź – one of the main industrial cities during the Tsarist times, now promoting itself as “the city of four cultures” (i.e. Polish, Jewish, Russian and German); 3) Białystok – the town which flourished economically during the Russian rule and which is currently a local cultural centre in the culturally and religiously diverse eastern Podlasie region (with Russian Old Believers still living there) and which, at the same time, is the central place for national commemorations of the deportees to Siberia during Tsarist and Soviet times through the Museum of the Memory of Siberia Deportations; 4) Spała – a small village which used to be the favourite Tsarist hunting residence and the home of a residence used by the Polish President before World War II; and 5) Białowieża – a former Tsarists hunting residence, currently using the images and narrations on Tsarist times to attract tourists from Poland and abroad (including significant numbers of tourists from Russia).

I am interested in the changing ways of defining and understanding heritage in different socio-cultural and ideological frameworks: the reasons why a given object is or is not defined as heritage, and the role of different local and state actors in these processes, such as public institutions as well as memory and heritage activists. During the project, I will also study the impact of local activism and memory narratives on post-imperial Russian heritage practices and the interpretations concerning the “nationality” of heritage (e.g. what is defined as “Polish” versus “Russian” heritage). My research team will be conducting interviews (mainly with representatives of local institutions and various types of memory makers, such as local historians, memory activists, history teachers and tourist guides, as well as with representatives of the Russian minority and the Orthodox Church). In addition, research on the local media discourse and museum exhibitions will be conducted.