

CONFERENCE REPORT

Places of Amnesia: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Forgotten Pasts
(Cambridge, 5–6 April 2016)

In April 2016, the University of Cambridge hosted an interdisciplinary conference “Places of Amnesia.” This event brought together over 80 researchers from 20 countries, who looked at how societies forget and sought to establish whether specific sites (people, events, knowledge) could be viewed as *places of amnesia*—the antipode of *lieux de mémoire*. The keynote speakers were **Paul Connerton** (Cambridge) and **Carlo Ginzburg** (Pisa/Los Angeles).

The first day started with one panel on the general mechanisms of amnesia, and another panel on places of amnesia in Soviet scholarship and socialist censorship. The discussant of this latter panel, **Samantha Sherry** (Oxford) pointed out the powerful, lasting impact Stalinist censorship had on academic research either by prompting scholars to find new avenues or by interrupting their research altogether, as the presenters in this panel demonstrated. **Frances Nethercott** (St Andrews) discussed the concept of visual perception of the past, for instance, of Dostoevsky’s St. Petersburg, that was developed by non-conformist scholars but hidden from a wider audience, whereas **Anastasiia Cherednychenko** (Kyiv) looked into the repression and provincialization of Byzantine Studies in Soviet Ukrainian scholarship. The third panel, with a discussant in **Rachel Perry** (Haifa), explored memoryscapes of the Holocaust in Poland. **Simon Goldberg** (Boston) argued that amnesia of places linked to mass violence could be resisted with poetry. A Holocaust poem like “Written in Pencil” by Dan Pagis can offer a powerful return to transport of the victims. In the same panel **Slawomir Kapralski** (Krakow) examined the development of spatial representations of Jews and the Holocaust in post-communist Poland since the 1990s, and how the resulting multi-directional memoryscapes produce a fissure between institutional, highly ritualized commemoration practices and grassroots communicative memories.

Three panels in the second session of the day spanned from discussion of marginalized and taboo memories to places of amnesia in Eurasia and socialist modernist architecture. In particular, **Martin Lohrer** (Oxford) used Chekhov's ethnographic writings to show how Sakhalin and the Russian's treatment of the Gilyak and Ainu people, has always been a place of amnesia on the mental map of the European part of the Soviet Union. The panels in the final session of the first day looked at resistance, subversion, the Holocaust in Central Europe, and mechanisms of spatial erasures in the Mediterranean and Asia. **Joanna Michlic** (Bristol) explained how the rightwing and conservative sections of Polish society continue to resist the incorporation of Poland's difficult past in its history through mechanisms of suppression, omission, and obfuscation. The keynote lecture "Unintentional Revelations. Rescuing the Past, Obliquely" by **Carlo Ginzburg** reinforced the point that micro history can shed as much, if not more, light on the past as conventional historical methods, and, in fact, provide unexpected results in a field of memory studies, that is continuously at risk of "finding the well-known."

The second day started with a panel on lost territories and liminal memories. While **Chloe Wells** (Joensuu) presented on Vyborg—once a Finnish city and now existing as such only as an imagined place, **Ievgheniia Sarapina** (Paris) responded that Polish places of worship and stately homes in Ukraine occupy similar places in cultural memory in Poland while remaining places of amnesia for local population in Ukraine. Together with **Elijah Teitelbaum** (Cambridge), who spoke about the once Jewish city of Kaifeng in China, they all highlighted how amnesia is always a component of memorial practices. Another panel was on reconciling with difficult pasts, while the third panel addressed post-colonial amnesia, looking at colonial monuments linked to the places of previously silenced genocide in Namibia by **Jeremiah Garsha** (Cambridge) and at "comfort women" coming out of silence in the dialogue between Korea and Japan by **Hyung Kyung Lee** (Seoul). It was chaired by **Damiana Otoiu** (Paris) and discussed by **Joshua Pritchard** (Cambridge).

The second session had one panel on the art of amnesia that explored how cinema, literature, and visual art respond to memories of troubled pasts. Presenters in the panel on post-socialist amnesia explored how memorials are used and transformed in post-socialist countries. In particular, **Daria Radchenko** (Moscow) explored the transformation of Soviet monuments in Ukraine into sites of deliberate forgetting and the reaction to these efforts to forget both in Ukraine and outside it. Presenters in the panel on Recycling Spaces looked at how public spaces where violence had occurred are used today: **Sophie Gleizes** (Oxford) presented the case of Sarajevo's bobsled track and the friction between memorialization, revitalization, and people's engagement with the materiality of this place, while **Aleksandr Staničić** (New York) spoke on how collective amnesia imposed by officials and architects through the complete reconstruction of war-damaged buildings in Belgrade was compensated later with spontaneous, "folk" memory practices. By comparing this with similar occurrences of post-World War II reconstruction, he also outlined the continuity in the efforts to erase reminiscence of past ideologies (and related tragic events) with post-conflict reconstruction designs. **Rubén Díaz** (Seville) concluded by discussing the touristification of Belchite Old Town that favors cultural amnesia of Franco's regime. The discussion was moderated by **Antony Kalashnikov** (Oxford) and **Dacia Viejo Rose** (Cambridge).

Finally, **Maria Silina** (Montréal) looked at how restoration of Soviet sites can be used as a tool of post-socialist amnesia. Maria analyzed the case of the Moscow Agricultural Exhibition that was initially built to illustrate the advantages of collectivization, the policy that led to the deaths of millions of peasants during the 1930s. In 2014, municipal authorities claimed to have restored the authenticity of the exhibition and made it a symbol of post-Soviet prosperity. Silina discussed the problematic nature of such claims in view of the history of the site: built by the repressed artists in 1937, regarded as totalitarian and corrupt during de-Stalinization, with its original pavilions long gone, it has in fact been turned into a place of Socialist nostalgia through the restoration of the remembered in

the absence of the original. Here, the past is (re)constructed of the past by forgetting and replacing it with visual symbols of nostalgia.

The second day continued with a workshop by **Carlo Ginzburg** on micro history as a research tool in Central and Eastern Europe, including the former Soviet Union. During the workshop Professor Ginzburg challenged the use of the concept of “identity” in the post-Soviet countries, the agency of the researcher, and the role of memory studies. In particular, he highlighted the risk (and temptation) of looking, and therefore finding, predictable evidence that confirms one’s hypothesis.

The last session comprised panels on amnesia of violence in literature, perpetrators of mass violence, and silenced memories of sites of repression. In this last panel **Margaret Comer** (Cambridge) ventured to the Solovki archipelago and memory of its Gulag past. With an abundance of visual materials Margaret used a site biography approach to trace changes in the “official” public attitude towards remembering the tangible and intangible heritage on Bol’shoi Solovetskii Island. She argued that despite changing political climate, public opinion, and state policies, there are still individuals and groups that remain determined to preserve and disseminate the dark, violent heritage of Solovki in various ways. The question remains, however, in which ways they have to adapt so as not to become guardians of counter-memory in light of the recent closure of similar sites of memory in Russia.

The conference concluded with a keynote lecture by **Paul Connerton** who tasked the audience with a question: can human bodies—the bodies in a forgotten mass grave, or a body type that was fashionable a century ago—also be considered “places of amnesia”? In the concluding remarks that followed **Paul Connerton** and **Carlo Ginzburg** answered many questions from the audience which developed into an engaging discussion. Both Connerton and Ginzburg stressed that though memory studies cannot substitute history as some scholars attempt to, Places of Amnesia can serve as a promising tool to recover understudied or silenced historical events and heritage. Thus, they concluded, Places of Amnesia events provide an excellent platform for an

interdisciplinary exchange between scholars and encourage further research. A publication of selected papers is to follow.

The Places of Amnesia project started as an interdisciplinary research group conceived by graduate students at the University of Cambridge in 2014. After twelve seminars hosted at the Centre for Research in Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) on various types of forgetting, its Convenors **Gruia Badescu**, **Daria Mattingly**, and **Elena Zezlina** pursued a larger event. The conference was organized under the aegis of the Slavonic Studies Department, University of Cambridge. It was supported by Cambridge Ukrainian Studies and grants by the Cambridge School of Arts and Humanities, the Centre for Doctoral Training (Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies), and the Museums and Controversial Collections project of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation. We wholeheartedly thank our sponsors and supporters; and we invite anyone interested in hearing more about the project to search for “Places of Amnesia” on Facebook.

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