

Workshop

Contested Spaces and Symbolic Landscapes in Texts from the Early Modern Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its Neighbouring Regions

University of Passau
29–30 March 2019

Organisation: Prof Dr Zhanna Nekrashevich-Karotkaja (Belarusian State University, Minsk)
Dr Marion Rutz (University of Passau)

In the 21st century as well as before, state borders have constantly proven their instability despite guaranties of invulnerability or “treaties of eternal peace”. Among the countless examples are the Russian-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty of 1997, the Eternal Peace of 1686 or the Thorn peace treaties (1411 and 1466). The political landscape is in constant motion. However, the discourses that legitimize this dynamic apply a static rhetoric of space: Vilnius belongs to Belarus, Przemyśl to the Ukraine, the Crimea is primordial Russian territory... Culturally embedded concepts of space (mental maps) are an important factor in the formation of identities. Due to a lack of reflection, they usually remain on an unconscious level and are a ready and effective tool for agitation.

Space

Since the collapse of the Communist states at the latest, the category ‘space’ has become a prominent research paradigm in East European Studies. Subsequent actual border conflicts initiated a further increase. Due to this interdisciplinary *spatial turn* and the acceptance of *culture* as a subject of research (in addition to language and literature), Slavic studies have turned their attention to new questions. The range of topics by far surpasses the traditional analysis of settings or descriptions of surroundings and their artistic functions (landscape as the mirror of the soul, Bachtins *chronotopoi*...). A starting-point in theory is Yuri Lotman’s interest in the relation between semiotic systems and non-lingual reality. Two practical examples from structuralism are Dmitri Likhachev’s research on the connection between garden architecture and poetry, and Vladimir Toporov’s work on the “Petersburg text”, which has inspired a whole series of studies on literary urban topography.

Meanwhile, research questions have become interdisciplinary. Whereas the *New Cultural Geography* re-evaluates the map as a cultural construction and explores, among others, the poetic aspects of their material (Pacific Ocean, Cape of Good Hope, Gate of Dawn ...), literary scholars examine the topographic information given in texts. The interest in representations of space as expressions of political and social discourses or as discourse strategies unites philology and history. How does literature (or other media) construct and interpret the political and topographic map of its time? Which landmarks are chosen and what meaning is attributed to

the mental map? Such symbolic topographies are of particular interest when there are conflicting claims.

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania

Whereas most researchers in cultural and literary studies deal with the “geo-poetics” or “geo-culturology” of the 20th and 21st century, the planned workshop turns to early modern times, i.e. the Renaissance and Baroque. The political borders and mental maps were even less stable than today and ‘space’ was an omnipresent subject in this epoch of geographic discoveries and cartographic revolutions.

The workshop focuses on literature written in or dealing with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, an area that until now has attracted rather little international attention (particularly in Slavic studies). The Grand Duchy has disappeared from our political maps. This territory, which was ruled in personal union with the Kingdom of Poland since 1386 and as part of the *Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów* since 1569, does not adhere to the national patterns of the 20th and 21st century. Today, several European states claim the cultural heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, appropriating it as part of their national history and literature. Comparisons and changes of perspective shall be facilitated by also paying attention to neighbouring regions: the Kingdom of Poland (in particular, the multi-ethnic *Ruś czerwona* around Leopold/Lwów/Lviv), the Grand Duchy’s southern territories (including Kiev) ceded to Poland in 1569, Prussia, Muscovy, etc.

Cultural space?

The workshop proposes to discuss two general theses. The first is the friction caused by religious and cultural heterogeneity. Just like the Kievan Rus’ (according to Hans Rothe), the early modern Grand Duchy of Lithuania was not a homogenous cultural space. Its population was strongly mixed by religion (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Uniate, Judaic, Muslim) and culture; several written languages were in use (Church Slavonic, Ruthenian, Latin, Polish, Lithuanian, etc.). Cohabitation and cultural interaction were much less harmonious and synergetic than contemporary researchers sometimes wish. Besides discussions about the political elites’ share in power, the denominational differentiation caused confrontations and initiated the development of excluding group identities. Secondly, the idea of clear-cut external borders, behind which other cultural spaces are located, is to be questioned in general and in respect to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in particular. Texts and ideas circulated in much greater contexts, depending on the chosen language. The cultural entanglements between the Grand Duchy and its neighbouring territories can be understood as a network of actors, communicating and quarrelling across borders.

Possible topics: examples

Beyond addressing general questions on the spatial coordinates in which the literature of the 16th and 17th century existed, and on how research can take this into account on a conceptual level, contributions to the workshop should, above all, analyse specific constructions of space, literary topographies, urban texts, etc. The category ‘space’ is an excellent starting point to explore political and denominational discourses. The workshop focuses on literary texts – ‘literature’ being understood in a quite broad sense, as common in research on pre-modern literature – but contributions to other media are welcome.

Then and now, many spatial representations are connected with questions of identity and specific claims: The modern *nations* look for themselves in the geographies of antique authors and struggle for a reconciliation of authorities and early modern realities, or for a revision of outdated knowledge. Where was *Sarmatia* and *Scythia* situated and which function could such antique ethnonyms fulfil? The use of contemporary politico-, ethno- and toponyms is also a fertile subject: Lithuania, Livonia, Moschovia, Polonia, Roxolanaia, Russia (Alba), Samogitia, Tartaria, Ukraina ... One's presence is legitimized by competing legends of origin (Lech, Palemon, Riurik) and foundation myths, which create dynastic spaces. Princes and magnates are celebrated as rulers of certain territories. Panegyric verses glorify towns, regions or countries. Texts about military campaigns or journeys contain many spatial details that are marked by the tension between *same* and *foreign*. Cultural appropriation accompanies the conquest of territory. Defeats and losses ask for a revision of mental maps – or the determined adherence to the possessions lost. The relocation of internal borders (1569) also arouses literary reactions.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, literature is the most important type of publicity and a significant means of (counter) propaganda. Critical reflection of this ideological dimension is essential for research. Contributions to the workshop could for example analyse competing representations of space in texts of different political and denominational origin. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania's multiculturalism and multilingualism is also a promising starting point for comparative analysis: how do representatives of different denominations or religions write about the same place or area? Are there different Vilnius or Kiev texts, or different literary topographies of the Grand Duchy? In which respects does the Polatsk/Polotsk – which was conquered by Stephan Bathory in 1580 – as described in Basilus Hyacinthus' Latin epyllion *Panegyricus in excidium Polocense*, differ from the city of Simeon Polotsky's *Metry* that welcomed the triumphant Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich in 1654?

Besides political contexts, cultural codes also have great importance. Is it possible to trace similarities or differences that result from the use of a certain language or bear a denominational imprint? Are motives taken from the Bible or "heathen" antiquity for example? Descriptions may use consolidated motive complexes or quote certain model texts. Intertextual references to texts in other languages and across confessional boundaries are of special interest.

The aim of the workshop is to explore different cultural traditions of perceiving and imagining the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its neighbouring territories, in their interaction and antagonism. In interdisciplinary and international dialogue, we want to generate new ideas and develop a European research network.

General information: We are applying for a grant and are optimistic that we will be able to cover reasonable travel and accommodation costs. We intend to publish the workshop results and ask for papers in English (or German).

For further information and questions, please contact:

marion.rutz@uni-passau.de

zhanna.nekrashevich-karotkaja@uni-oldenburg.de