

NEWS IN BRIEF

BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA¹

The international scientific colloquium, titled “Between Individual and Collective Trauma”, took place on March 12–13, 2020, in Tartu, Estonia. It was organized in collaboration between the Estonian Literary Museum, the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, the Research Center for Cultural Studies and Cross-cultural Communication (Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia), and the Research Center for Cultural Exclusion and Frontier Zones (Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Branch of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences). Liisi Laineste, Natalia Artemenko, and Sergey Troitskiy from these institutions constituted the organizing committee.

The colloquium was devoted to the issues of interrelations of different cultural topoi, setting the context for social and cultural communication and traumatizing events, stirring discord in collective memory and identity, and demanding the reconfiguration of cultural topology.

A number of papers were delivered by scholars from Belarus, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, the USA, Finland, and Estonia. The two-day colloquium comprised fourteen papers, round table summarizing discussions, as well as a presentation of a monograph on a topic related to the main theme of the colloquium. Two evening workshops provided the participants with the scope for the informal conversation.

Liat Steir-Livny from Sapir College and The Open University (Israel) delivered a keynote speech titled “Holocaust Humor in Israel: Between Individual and Collective Trauma”. Her talk was concerned with the way the Holocaust is perceived in the contemporary Israeli society. The issue of the Holocaust was also delved into in Maya Camargo-Vemuri’s (Johns Hopkins University, USA) presentation, “Selective Memory in the Holocaust”. She referred to the gender aspects of the traumatic experience inherent in female prisoners of Nazi camps – the problem that has not been closely examined yet. The issue of the traumatic experience inherent in women was also reviewed in Jolita Lukšyte’s (University of Latvia) paper titled “Trauma and Female Body: Representations of Women in Lithuanian and Latvian Contemporary Women’s Texts”, and in Leena Kurvet-Käosaar’s (University of Tartu & Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia) presentation, “Trauma and Baltic Women’s Life Stories of the Soviet Repressions”.

Three other reports on trauma researches pursued in the post-Soviet countries, delivered at the colloquium, were “Old Traumas for the New Age: Making the New Memorial Landscape in the Contemporary Belarus” by Siarhei Hrunto (Center for the Belarusian Culture, Language, and Literature Research, Belarus), “Card Index of the Agents of the KGB of the Latvian SSR: ‘Love by Calculation’, ‘Immaculate Conception’, and Restoration of State Independence” by Uldis Krēsliņš (University of Latvia), and Andrey Makarychev’s (University of Tartu, Estonia) paper, “Self-inflicted Traumatization: Biopolitics and Bare Life in the Russophone Estonia”.

The second keynote speech, “Border and Mobility Related Trauma and Materialized Narratives” was given by Tuulikki Kurki (University of Eastern Finland, Finland). She presented the problem of the construction of non-narrative knowledge, which is being formed on the basis of things, artefacts, and other objects related to the traumatic experience. Such an approach opens some new perspectives for studying the contemporary traumatic experience related to a migration process.

Aleksei Smirnov’s (Saint Petersburg State University, Russia) presentation, “Representation of Traumatic Experience in the Soviet Painting of the 1960s–1970s” referred to the issue of visual studies; namely, to the paintings depicting the traumatic experience of Soviet people during the war and in the post-war period. Alyona Ivanova’s (Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University, Russia) paper, “Hospital Clowning as a Way to Overcome Trauma” delved into a new method of overcoming a traumatic experience through a game interaction between a patient and a specially trained actor (a hospital clown).



Participants of the trauma conference at the Estonian Literary Museum. This conference was the last one held before the global corona crisis; already the next day the museum was closed for visitors. Photograph by Alar Madisson 2020.

The next four participants devoted their presentations to the theoretical aspects of comprehending cultural trauma. Natalia Artemenko (Saint Petersburg State University, Russia) in her “Post-catastrophic Time: Trauma as a Figure of Silence” delved into the correlation between trauma and memory, determined by the time shift occurring between trauma and its representation. Sergey Troitskiy (Saint Petersburg State University, Russia) in his “Victimal Economy and Trauma” analyzed cultural practices providing a balance between cultural memory and cultural oblivion. The practice of teaching history in Soviet high schools in the 1920s–1930s was the focal point of Yulia Zevako’s (Ural Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia) “Mechanisms of Forming an ‘Affiliative’ Post-memory of the Difficult Pages of History (as an Example, the ‘Era of Political Repression’”. Kseniya Kapelchuk (ITMO University, Russia) in her presentation “Is Historical Trauma out of Joint?” highlighted the contestable issues which were formulated by Aleida Assmann, a prominent theorist of cultural memory, in her description of the temporal regime of modernity.

Unfortunately, for reasons beyond the control of the organizers, two previously announced talks were not given: Sylwia Papier’s (Jagiellonian University, Poland) “Dealing with Collective Trauma and Own Heritage through the ‘Hack’ in the Museum: Case of Krakow’s Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum”, and Daniil Anikin’s (Moscow State University, Russia) “Traumatisation of the Past and ‘Martyrological Thinking’ in Modern Eastern Europe”.

The delivered presentations stirred active debate involving both the participants and guests of the colloquium. A collective monograph titled *Topologiia travmy: Individual’nyi travmaticheskii opyt i opyt istoricheskikh katastrof* (The Topology of Trauma: The Individual Traumatic Experience and the Experience of Historical Catastrophes), edited by N. Artemenko was also presented at the colloquium. Some authors who had contributed to the monograph were among the participants of the colloquium.

Aleksei Smirnov
Associate Professor
St. Petersburg University

Note

¹ The review was written with the financial support of the RFBR (project No. 18-011-00570 A, “Theory of cultural trauma: Individual traumatic experience and experience of historical catastrophes”).