

Historicizing “Whiteness” in Eastern Europe and Russia

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Over the last decade, issues of migration both out of and into Eastern Europe have brought questions of “whiteness” and its “defence” into the public language of the region. Populists of different political stripes have presented their countries as protectors of traditional European whiteness against a multicultural West. This is in fact quite an unusual phenomenon: race in general and whiteness in particular have for the most part been hidden discourses, absent from mainstream political or cultural thinking about the area itself. At those moments when race did come to the fore, it was often externalised as a phenomenon which adhered only to the western and/or the capitalist imperialist other.

Yet, as some have argued, whiteness has been fundamental to Eastern European history and even the very conception of the region since the 19th century. Anikó Imre referred to Eastern European nationalisms ‘unspoken insistence on their whiteness’. Some have posited a regional identity based on the in-between-ness born of a fragile or frustrated whiteness: such an identity might be allied with the privileged whiteness produced by European imperialism and the global colour line to which it gave rise, whilst also being ambivalent towards, or sometimes excluded from, the projects and institutions from which the power of whiteness has stemmed. While critical theories of race and whiteness emphasise the idea that, in Charles W. Mills’s words, ‘white supremacy was global’, eastern Europeans’ ability to fully exploit being racialised as white has arguably been more conditional, as a result of the peripheralisation of the region itself. Yet it was visits to Eastern Europe that prompted W.E.B. Du Bois to redefine his thinking about race. He observed ethnic relations in the region and understood that race problems were not only about colour.

Despite the growing number of critical histories of whiteness both on a regional and global level, there has been little academic engagement with such questions in the study of Eastern Europe, the Russian Empire and the USSR. This workshop seeks to explore the role that whiteness has played in the articulation of identities from a historical perspective – roughly from an age of high European imperialism in the mid-19th century until the present. We encourage contributions which explore the multiple conceptualisations of whiteness in national spaces, intercultural transfers and transnational impacts across the region, whether this be Central Europe, South- or North-Eastern Europe, Russia or what is now the “post-Soviet space”.

We welcome both theoretical papers and case studies that open out wider questions, from disciplinary perspectives across the humanities and social sciences. We ask that papers on contemporary issues also include historical framing or reflections. The following might be considered:

- In what ways has whiteness been important in the constitution of Eastern European, Russian or Eurasian identities?
- Why have imaginations of Eastern Europe as a region preserving a traditional European whiteness against a multicultural West become possible during the recent refugee crisis?
- When does race become visible in the historical record, and how do we work with whiteness as a concept when it is a marginalised or a ‘hidden script’? Which sources and methodologies can help to overcome this?
- How have ‘outsiders’ – whether in the West, or in the global South – seen and encountered eastern European whiteness?
- How has whiteness been considered differently in south-eastern Europe versus central Europe versus the Russian/Soviet empires? Have experiences of rule by various empires, and differences in local religious assemblages, produced divergent conceptions over the longer term?

- What is the relationship between a broader European colonial project and eastern European whiteness?
- How has whiteness been related to the region’s changing relationships to the global capitalist system, including issues of class, peripherality and migration?
- How has whiteness been connected to ideas of Europeanness?
- What affiliations with, or against, whiteness did Eastern Europeans produce under state socialism?
- How has whiteness been viewed by the region’s minorities?
- How has whiteness been implicated in the production of anti-Semitism, Romaphobia, and Islamophobia?
- To what extent do engagements with Islam at home or abroad shape ideas of Eastern European whiteness?
- How have nations and their experts produced such racialised knowledge?
- Is Eastern European whiteness different to other forms of whiteness?
- How have ideas of whiteness influenced constructions of gender and sexuality, and vice versa?
- What part has whiteness played in shaping how academic knowledge from and about Eastern Europe has been produced and used?
- How have eastern Europeans contributed to global racial formations around whiteness?

Abstracts of 300–500 words, together with an accompanying short CV, should be submitted to whitenesseasterneurope@gmail.com [1] by 11 March 2019. The selected participants will be notified by the middle of March. Some financial support for travel and accommodation is available, but we ask that contributors also explore funding opportunities at their home institutions as well.

Organisers: Catherine Baker (University of Hull), [Agnieszka Kościńska](#) [2] (University of Warsaw), Bogdan Iacob and James Mark (both University of Exeter). This event is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) project, ‘Socialism Goes Global. Cold War Connections Between the ‘Second’ and ‘Third Worlds’ <http://socialismgoesglobal.exeter.ac.uk/> [3]. We will be hosted by the Centre for the Study of Equal Opportunity Policies at the Political Science Department (University of Bucharest) <http://cpes.fspub.unibuc.ro/> [4].

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[2] <https://www.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/instytut/ludzie/pracownicy/agnieszka-koscianska>

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