

Mirrored Reality

East Europe and the Public Sphere in Transition

Gerd Koenen

The Fatal Nexus

Germany and Russia 1925-2025

Upon its founding in 1925, the journal OSTEUROPA operated within a broad force field of an eastward orientation that centred on Russia. This corresponded to the Bolsheviks' expectations that they would be able to establish state socialism in Russia with the help of Germany's technical and industrial potential and, in combination with German revisionist efforts, would undermine the "Versailles world system". For the Russians' world view and mentality, the catastrophic confrontation of the Second World War remains of decisive importance. This confrontation recoded memories of the Great Terror's victims and the period of co-operation with Germany after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. There would hardly have been a Great Patriotic War without Hitler's war of annihilation, and the Red Army would hardly have been able to advance as far as the Elbe. Only then was Stalin able to rise to the heights of world history on which he stood after 1945 and to establish the new, outsized Soviet empire. Putin's revisionist policy is fuelled by the mental reflexes of this victory. With the war against Ukraine, which is aimed at a united Europe, he is tearing Russia from its cultural-historical moorings and deliberately destroying the measure of normality that has existed since 1989.

Christian Neef

The Balancing Act of Reporting

Paul Scheffer, Hermann Pörzgen, Gerd Ruge in Moscow

The leadership of the Soviet Union saw controlling the reporting of foreign correspondents as a matter of policy. Whoever came to Moscow as a correspondent quickly found themselves caught between political considerations and an objective view of reality. Paul Scheffer, Hermann Pörzgen, and Gerd Ruge, who all helped shape the German image of Russia and German public opinion vis-à-vis the Soviet Union for decades, had to struggle with restrictions and blind spots despite all their knowledge and access on the ground. Each later admitted to errors and a certain helplessness in assessing Russia. The task of the correspondents was and is: informing people about what is happening. Self-censorship and partisan journalism do harm to the work of informing others.

Markus Ackeret

„I No Longer Write about Some Topics“

Correspondent Markus Ackeret on working in Moscow

Markus Ackeret, correspondent for the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, compares working conditions in Beijing and Moscow, speaks of the tension between his own standards and reality, which in Russia in times of war is characterised by growing

restrictions, intimidation efforts, and the fear this causes among potential interlocutors. He points out ways of avoiding the danger of self-censorship and asserts that domestic politics de facto no longer exist in Russia. The war has narrowed the field of vision; the complexity and heterogeneity of Russian society, which ticks differently than is expected in Switzerland and Germany, are no longer seen.

100 Years of OSTEUROPA

Cord Aschenbrenner

A Reading Journalist's Thoughts

Eastern Europe – “More Substance than Appearance”

What is this? A magazine that is published on letterpress paper. To call its issues “booklets” is a sheer understatement. Cover art that mysteriously shows Saturn’s moon Minas and alludes to Russia’s orbit, topics that can rob even the most relaxed reader of his relaxed mood, a strict, Protestant, layout, no edutainment, no zeitgeist, just lucid articles, empirical facts, intelligibility. The makers of this journal are concerned with the essentials: they want to enlighten and provide orientation for the vast expanse of Eastern Europe. That’s why it has to be: OSTEUROPA.

Manfred Sapper

In the Spirit of the Times and against the Grain

OSTEUROPA, 1925-2025: A History

Magazines are snapshots of the times. The magazine OSTEUROPA was founded in the Weimar Republic, continued to publish during the Nazi dictatorship, represented a typical medium of the Federal Republic during the Germany’s division, and is now produced in Berlin. Its history reflects two historical processes. One concerns German attitudes towards Eastern Europe. These move between curiosity and alienation, friendship and enmity, co-operation and confrontation. The other is the development of societies and states in Europe’s east. OSTEUROPA accompanies and analyses these societies from different perspectives. The journal understands politics and culture not in opposition to one another, but in relation to one another. As a matter of publishing policy, OSTEUROPA goes against the prevailing trend of specialisation and fragmentation of the public sphere.

Documentation

Paul Ingendaay

Pact of the Free

A Magazine Opposed to the Destruction of Thinking

OSTEUROPA is a journal that goes against the spirit of the times. It remains a regionally focused, interdisciplinary academic journal, at a time when, for example, an ever greater narrowing of disciplines is taking place at universities. The balancing act that the journal performs in order to bridge the gap between academia and the general public is also becoming more difficult for other reasons, as editors Manfred Sapper and Volker Weichsel explain. In general, a destruction of thinking can be observed.

Jens Bisky
Counsel for the Wirtten Word
The Anachronistic Nature of Editorial Work

In debates over the digital revolution or the “new structural change of the public sphere”, concrete editorial work hardly plays any role, although it essentially decides the quality of newspapers and magazines and thus shapes the general public. The reason for this omission may be that the core of the editorial business – the work editors perform on texts – has changed less dramatically over the decades than distribution channels or reader behaviour. This deliberately subjective review is meant to illustrate the profession’s most important features and why it makes sense to cultivate anachronistic-seeming editorial virtues such as presence of mind and diligence.

Felix Eick
A Painful Realisation
How Osteuropa Texts “Function” in the Online Era

OSTEUROPA has always had to fight for reach – in an era of increasing dissemination of content on the internet, probably more than ever. The magazine is a scientific-journalistic hybrid, which means that the goals of both directions have to be weighed against each other. Sometimes, they contradict each other, precisely when it comes to - in journalistic jargon – the “functioning” of texts. So, what in future will an article in OSTEUROPA need to bring to the table in order to appeal to and reach more people?

Aurelia Ohlendorf
Thinking Aids
Maps in Eastern Europe

The magazine OSTEUROPA uses texts and maps to convey knowledge. The texts tell a story in succession, the maps visualise the juxtaposition of the information. Maps show geographical, socio-economic, and political content and enable the visualization of complexity and simultaneity in space. The OSTEUROPA archive consists of 550 maps, which are available in digital and printed formats. They cover expanses of territory, countries and regions, functional dimensions of Europe, natural resources and the energy industry, historical topics, and matters of comparative politics such as elections. But how does a map find its form? A look at the map workshop provides some answers.

Gwendolyn Sasse
At the Interface
Academia and the Public. Reflections

Russia’s war against Ukraine has catapulted Eastern European research into the public eye. Society and politics demand background information, categorisation, explanation. In itself, it is the hour of the experts. But the logic of the media and the laws of the attention economy produce irritating results: Ukraine surprisingly seldom and rarely comes up in public discourse. The media offer a stage for

“experts” without expertise. TV talk shows stage debates at the end of which it is concluded: the situation is difficult. War or peace degenerates into a matter of opinion. Enlightenment through knowledge does not come this way. But for academics, intervening in public debates remains a civic duty. However, it is important to make oneself and the public aware of the possibilities and limits of one’s own expertise.

Eastern Europe in Focus Dimensions of Perception

Dietrich Beyrau Change of Perspective Historical Research on Eastern Europe

Historical research on Eastern Europe looks back on a history of over a hundred years: the catastrophes of the 20th century were reflected in historiography. While “the East” and the Slavs had been the exotic, the alienating “other” since the 19th century, they became the object of German hegemonic endeavours from the end of the 1920s onwards and the victims of genocidal warfare during the Second World War. Historians of Eastern Europe provided the legitimisation for this as “fighting science”. After the war, silence, amnesia, and self-amnesty prevailed. From the late 1960s onwards, the generation that grew up during the war switched to a historiography oriented to social history. For quite a few members of the German student movement of the late 1960s, Marxism, the Russian Revolution, and its consequences were not just a historical subject, but a stimulus for interpreting the present. Today, classical intellectual, economic, and political history have been marginalised. The turn to a new cultural history has opened new perspectives, but it is also accompanied by de-politicisation.

Karl Schlögel My Eastern Europe An Attempt to Summarise

The historian Karl Schlögel looks back on a lifelong preoccupation with Eastern Europe. His interest in what lay outside of West German reality, which was awakened in his early childhood, continued during his student years in the discovery of Russian literature, the Soviet avant-garde, heretical communism, and the Polish labour movement. Travelling was a decisive means of gaining knowledge - the first trips took place as early as the mid-1960s, and countless more followed after communism’s fall. Encounters with the real expanse of the “third Europe” – which had largely disappeared from Western consciousness but had been merely concealed by the continent’s division – opened up new historical perspectives. However, the work on an undivided history that began back then now seems to have reached a new epochal threshold.

Kristiane Janeke
Repressed, Forgotten, Neglected
The War against Poland and the Soviet Union

The memory of the war against Poland and the Soviet Union, the occupation, and the crimes associated with them went through several phases in Germany. Initially, silence about the war in Eastern Europe prevailed in the postwar period. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that a gradual reappraisal began, which received a decisive boost by the Wehrmacht exhibition in the 1990s. Today, the violence in the Eastern European theatres of war, the crimes committed against the civilian population and prisoners of war are an integral part of research. Nonetheless, in German remembrance cultural, the “historical space of East-Central and Eastern Europe” is still peripheral and perceived as foreign, unlike that of the West.

Anke Hilbrenner
“World Champions in Remembrance” with Blinders
The Late Look at the Holocaust in Eastern Europe

For a long time after the Second World War, German war crimes - in particular, the attempt to exterminate the Jews of Eastern Europe - were not a topic of discussion in the German public, although there would have been plenty of opportunities to take note of them. In the post-war period, there were several occasions to draw attention to the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Remembrance of the war crimes in Eastern Europe and of the Shoah has changed. To this day, however, Eastern Europe is perceived rather as a mere theatre of war. The German public has yet to adopt an Eastern European perspective on these crimes of the century.

Ulrich Schmid
“Distant Countries about Which We Know Little”
The Politicized Reception of East European Literature, 1946–1989

For large parts of the Western European reading public, Eastern Europe remained terra incognita after the Second World War. The countries behind the “Iron Curtain” were perceived as the “Eastern Bloc”. Specific cultural and historical traditions that were formative for authors of individual national literatures were often of little interest to Western readers. Nonetheless, literature from Eastern Europe was translated, published, and read in the German-speaking world during this period. Decisive for this were, on the one hand, the discussion of the Soviet camps and criticism of the system among disappointed Marxists and, on the other hand, an “existentialist” tone that Western readers believed they found in Eastern European texts. In every instance, the author’s biography and personal point of view played a decisive role in how a book was received.

Katharina Raabe
A World in the Shadows
Eastern European Readings, 1989–2025

Since 1989, the countries of the former Eastern Bloc have experienced an unprecedented literary awakening. The West discovered a multi-voiced literary

continent that had previously lain in the dark corners of public attention. The perception of important, present-day literary voices was accompanied by the belated reception of a number of European writers who are now part of world literature: the radical nature of the artistic means employed by authors such as Imre Kertész and Varlam Shalamov created a new idea of literary testimony. Belatedly, the literature of Ukraine also came into focus, and with it, a giant unknown country between Europe, which had expanded to the east, and Russia. Marked by the region's history of violence, on the one hand, and full of enthusiasm for experimentation, on the other, literature from Eastern Europe gave expression to stories undescribed and untold: the geo-poetic landscape prose and the family novel resonated strongly with German-speaking audiences. Today, some 30 years after the opening, the pendulum is swinging back. Belarus and Ukraine are in danger of sinking back into the grey zone from which they emerged – a “final frontier” excluded from the European peace project. In times of exile and virtual spaces, literature is detaching itself from its geographic location. Eastern European literature is no longer necessarily written in Eastern Europe or in one of its languages. What remains, however, is the pattern of crisis as a condition for visibility - and the role of writers as victims and witnesses of war and dictatorship.

Dorothea Redepenning
The Sound of the Century
Music from the Soviet Union in the German States

Music is a universal of human culture, but its perception is always influenced by social and political conditions. This is especially true for the German reception of classical music from the Soviet Union and Russia. In the Weimar Republic, interest in music from the newly founded USSR ran very high. During National Socialism, no music was to be heard that could be described with the catchphrase “Jewish Bolshevism”, but after the Hitler-Stalin pact, there was a bizarre, brief flowering of musical exchange. During the Cold War, the reception of Soviet music, especially contemporary operas, in East and West Germany took place according to ideological principles. During Perestroika, interest exploded, special concerts and festivals were held, and a close network of musical contacts was established. Since 24 February 2022, this network has been at risk of being torn apart. The war triggered demands to “Cancel Russian Culture”. But Russian music continues to resound: Sofia Gubaidulina's “Wrath of God” has become a memorial of sonorous contemplation.

Roland Götz
Reforming What Couldn't Be Reformed
The Soviet Economy and Its Reforms in OSTEUROPA

In the issues of OSTEUROPA published between 1925 and 1939, various authors described the economic development of the Soviet Union from “War Communism” through the “New Economic Policy” to Stalin's planned economy. They made no mention of economic reforms, as it was only years after Stalin's death that the Soviet leadership attempted to improve the efficiency of the economic system through reforms, which had to remain within existing ideological constraints. These attempts, which continued until 1989, were presented and evaluated in

OSTEUROPA. Most authors confined themselves to explaining the problems of implementation, which were denounced in the Soviet press. The de facto impossibility of proper centralised production and price planning was occasionally mentioned, but its significance for the Soviet Union's increasingly weak economic development was hardly discussed.

General Public and Society in Transition

Astrid Sahn

Civil Society by the Grace of Lukashenka? Social Structural Change in Belarus

Over two decades, it has been possible to observe a struggle between two tendencies in Belarus: was society going to develop as an autonomous or state-run activity? The mass protests after the 2020 presidential elections impressively demonstrated society's demand for self-organisation, political participation, and the public spaces required for this. Since then, the Lukashenka regime has been brutally enforcing its concept of civil society controlled from on high. In light of the growing global trend towards autocratization, it is important to understand which functions civil society performs in today's Belarus and how much scope remains for independent action within it.

Diana Dutsyk, Andreas Umland **Between Freedom and Censorship** **Ukrainian Media in Times of War**

The media market in Ukraine has changed radically since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022: the era of oligarchic media dominance is over, while social media has gained significantly more importance. Despite all the war-related challenges and structural changes, Ukrainian public discourse has preserved a relative degree of pluralism. Ukrainian society can still choose from a large number of different periodicals, channels, platforms, and other largely independent means of mass communication to receive relevant social and political news.

Florian Töpfl **Repression and Brutalisation** **Russia's War and the Transformation of Public Life**

For a long time, there were still niches of public life within authoritarian Russia where criticism of the political leadership could be expressed. This has changed since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Critics of the Putin regime have been criminalised and exiled, sanctions against free speech have been tightened, Western digital platforms have been suppressed, and public discourse has been decoupled from any democratic normative ideal. A coarsening can be observed in the media. All public spaces are subject to the autocrat's claim to power. Criticism of Putin is taboo. However, public criticism of subordinate officials remains possible. It contributes to supplying the autocracy with information and increasing the efficiency of the domineering, repressive apparatus.

Ksenia Luchenko
Against Censorship and War
Independent Media in Exile and in Russia

Ever since Putin took office as president in 2000, independent media outlets have been under pressure. The dismantling of the television station NTV marked the starting point. Since then, more and more media have been criminalized, stigmatized as “foreign agents”, and closed down. Freedom of the press has been abolished. Since the full-scale attack on Ukraine, de facto censorship has prevailed in Russia. Around 1,500 journalists have left the country. Russian-language media continue their work in exile and also find an audience in Russia. One concern is their funding. It is becoming increasingly difficult to conduct research on the ground with the help of stringers and anonymous informants. Russia’s authorities have taken the Chinese path. They are trying to bring the Internet under their complete control. With the elimination of the Russian public sphere, the political and social importance of journalism in exile has grown: it has become a surrogate for the public sphere.

Birger Schütz
The Downfall of a Beacon of Hope
Freedom of the Press and Public Life in Kyrgyzstan

Until 2020, Kyrgyzstan was the leader among the Central Asian states with a diverse media landscape and good working conditions for journalists. But President Sadyr Japarov has initiated an about-face. His authoritarian regime is increasingly restricting freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Journalists are threatened on the Internet, thrown into prison or driven abroad. The secret service and the judiciary are hunting down independent editorial offices and critical minds. Anti-press legislation gives all of this a legal veneer, while restrictions are disguised as a fight against “fake news” and enemies of “traditional values”.

Felix Sandalov
Difficult Counter-Public
Russian Publishers in Emigration

The war against Ukraine, increasing repression, and growing censorship have driven thousands of writers, journalists, publishers, and creative minds in the publishing industry from Russia into exile. They have founded numerous publishing houses and produce everything for which there is no longer room in Russia: non-fiction books on taboo subjects, anti-war literature, fiction by celebrities such as Boris Akunin, Vladimir Sorokin, or Dmitrii Gluchovskii, as well as unknown authors who are banned in their homeland. They contribute to a counter-public that also shines back on Russia. The creativity and flexibility of this publishing world in exile is high, but their financial situation will remain difficult until a functioning market emerges. The writer Mikhail Shishkin praises its work: “They are saving the dignity of our culture.”

Philipp Christoph Schmäddeke
Academia in Exile
Structural Problems, Challenges, Perspectives

The regimes in Russia and Belarus are persecuting dissidents with increasing severity. Thousands of academics and many students are also suffering as a result. In both countries, it is becoming increasingly clear that critical thinking and academic freedom are coming to an end. The quality, production, and communication of academic work are in decline. In Ukraine, too, Russia's war of aggression has driven tens of thousands of mainly female academics and students into emigration. The consequences for the country's education system and institutions of higher learning are dramatic. Western funding and admission programmes are unable to cope with this exodus of academics. Academic discourse among scientists in exile or let alone intellectual counter-publics cannot develop under these oft precarious living conditions. A rethink is needed. The United States of the 1930s and 1940s can serve as a model.

Elements of a Digital Public Space

Felix Ackermann
From Telegraph to Telegram
Digital Platforms in Russia and Ukraine

Since 2014, over the course of Russia's war against Ukraine, wartime digital public spheres have emerged in both countries, with citizens' mobile phones as the interface. With the help of commercially operated digital platforms, they exchange information about the course of the war, as well as their own reactions and interpretations. In this way, they contribute to the emergence of a digital public sphere. The resulting archives are a potential target for state persecution. At the same time, they represent an important source for future research.

Wanja Müller
Nationalization of Odnoklassniki
Classmates in Digital Authoritarianism

The Russian social network Odnoklassniki shows how the Putin regime has increasingly come to see social media as part of its authoritarian media strategy. Originally launched as an independent and private company, the platform is now in state hands and is being instrumentalised - for propaganda and war purposes, as well as for influencing the federal elections in Germany. Odnoklassniki is a biotope of "digital authoritarianism".

Taras Nazaruk
A Decade of Telegram
Freedom of Expression and Security Concerns

Telegram cultivates the image of a free, uncensored medium. In authoritarian states, this makes the platform attractive for those who fear state censorship or

repression. Yet, for individual users, Telegram itself has significant security gaps that authorities can use to persecute opponents. Telegram has developed into a hybrid medium that enables private communication in encrypted chats and reaches an audience of millions beyond the established mass media in public channels. The operators' principle of not intervening in a moderating manner creates a Janus-faced Telegram. On the one hand, it serves critical groups as an organisational platform and mouthpiece, and, on the other, the promise of anonymity attracts shady characters who abuse the platform's freedom. The Ukrainian authorities are not the only ones alarmed by the platform's influence on national security.

Gundula Pohl

Content Creator in Uniform

Belarus's "Genocide" Campaign on YouTube

Social media platforms are potentially a powerful propaganda tool for autocrats. In Lukashenka's Belarus, the General Prosecutor's Office is spreading a historical-political narrative of the "genocide of the Belarusian people" on YouTube. Video series about the war crimes committed by the German occupiers build a bridge to the present. The aim is to prove that the enemies of the Belarusian people of yesterday are returning today in the form of "NATO aggressors", "Ukrainian fascists", and "traitors". But these series have failed to mobilise the public.

Hanna Horn

Intermediate Media World

LiveJournal as a Refuge for Belarusian Voices

The history of digitally produced literature on the Russian and Belarusian-speaking Internet began on LiveJournal. The platform offered authors a format where they could interact with their readership. The unique types of texts reflected in the blog entries, comments, and memes represent their own kind of contribution to the history of Slavic literature. From 2010 on, these literary practices shifted to other digital platforms, most notably Facebook. Nonetheless, the New York-based Belarusian writer Tatsiana Zamirovskaya decided to keep publishing on LiveJournal in order to stay in touch with readers of the first hour of digital writing and to continue the chronology of her life. The shutting down of the platform in October 2024 proves the thesis that social networks have a short half-life and shows how quickly a digital platform can become a historical archive.