

Eurasia Borderlands Review

At the beginning of September a delegation from the Slavic Research Center (SRC) was invited by the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw to participate in a joint seminar. The OSW is a Polish think tank that monitors and analyses the political, economic and social situation in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Southern Caucasus, Central Asia and Germany. The Centre is closely connected to policy makers and its research is addressed mainly to state institutions including the Chancellery of the President, the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, ministries and government agencies as well as the Parliament of the Republic of Poland. It was established in 1990, and today employs around 50 analysts and is fully funded by the state budget.

Together with the SRC and in partnership with the Embassy of Japan in Warsaw and the East-West Center of Washington DC, a seminar was held at the OSW on 2nd September 2011 which brought together participants from Japan, Poland, the United States, Russia, Holland and the United Kingdom. The first session began with a discussion of border issues in Eurasia. One of the guest speakers was Satu Limaye, Director of the East-West Center in Washington DC, who provided a grand overview of the American view towards the role of China and Russia in the Asia Pacific region. This presentation was followed by a regionally specific paper on the history of the territorial dispute between Japan and Russia by Hiroshi Itani. After this historical context, Marcin Kaczmarek presented a Polish perspective on Russia's policy towards Japan and China. Such a broad range of perspectives on this region led to an interesting discussion and included comments from the Charge d' Affaires of the Embassy of Japan in Warsaw, Ms. Kazuko Shiraishi.

The second session was opened by the head of the Russian Department of the OSW, Marek Menkiszak, who delivered a talk on the prospects for the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This was followed by two thought provoking papers on the Transnistria region by Witold Rodkiewicz and Shinkichi Fujimori. In response to these papers two discussants – Wojciech Kononczuk of the OSW and Professor Nikolai Petro from the University of Rhode Island – were invited to comment on these papers. While the prospect of a quick resolution to the above conflicts seems unlikely they nevertheless stimulated a vigorous debate as scholars from each side of Eurasia exchanged opinions and views on these intriguing regions and their connection to global geopolitics.

After further informal discussions over a traditional Polish lunch, the afternoon session saw a diverse set of papers combining Western and Eastern views towards Russia and Central Europe. Akihiro Iwashita presented on the search for a New International Order and northeast Asia's role in this order. Tadatsu Mori, currently on a sabbatical at Kobe University from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, discussed how the Russian state officially memorialised the Second World War both in Europe and in the Far East. Two other papers presented by Hiroshi Fukuda and Marta Jaroszewicz focussed respectively on the shifting historical meaning of Central Europe and the EU's visa policy towards its Eastern neighbours. The final comment came from Martin van der Velde from Radboud University in the Netherlands, who neatly concluded the discussions with a fascinating talk on the theoretical understandings of territory and borders in contemporary political geography.

Such ideas have an important role to play in understanding and appreciating how foreign policy is formulated.

At first, Poland and Japan appear to have little in common but over the course of the seminars it was revealed that there was much to share. Both countries have at times strained relations with Russia and can find themselves in the shadow of their close relationship with the United States. Unfortunately it is rare occasion when scholars based in Japan can meet with their Polish counterparts to discuss these issues. Therefore, it was refreshing to hold a research seminar in Warsaw with participants from Japan, Poland and beyond which allowed old problems to be framed with new ideas and insights. Of course the discussions did not end with the closing seminar but continued over the weekend where an excursion to the beautiful city of Krakow revealed one of Europe's finest cities. However, the nearby site of Auschwitz also provided a sobering and depressing reminder of Europe's darkest moment.

Paul Richardson (JSPS Postdoctoral Fellow, Slavic Research Center)

