

Call for Papers

Trauma in Eastern Europe – Concept, Experience, Memory in Ethnography and Historical Anthropology

Conference on 12 and 13 June 2026 at the University of Graz, Austria

Organised by:

- Department of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology at the University of Graz
- Section Southeast European History and Anthropology at the Department of History of the University of Graz
- Commission Cultural Contexts of Eastern Europe in the German Society for Empirical Cultural Studies
- Expert Commission for Empirical Cultural Studies in the Johann Gottfried Herder Research Council

Both historically and today, the societies of Eastern Europe have been shaped in many ways by political and social violence, by war and genocide, expulsion, and persecution. Especially from a Western perspective, these experiences have increasingly been framed in terms of collective or individual trauma.

The conference seeks to shift perspectives in three interrelated areas of ethnographic, historical-anthropological, and ethno-psychoanalytic research. The contributions reflect on concepts of the traumatic in both historical and contemporary Eastern European contexts. They broaden the methodological repertoire of ethnography by incorporating subject-oriented research with and about people who have experienced violence in Eastern European settings, and they investigate the sites, influences, and practices of traumatic collective memories.

The call addresses interdisciplinary researchers working in ethnographic, historical, and ethno-psychoanalytic fields. We welcome contributions grounded in research and lived experience from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, as well as from contexts of displacement and diaspora. Submissions may engage with questions such as:

1. Concepts

How was trauma conceived, described, and negotiated in Eastern Europe over the course of the 20th century?

In this thematic field, we welcome contributions that analyse the linguistic, medical, and social frameworks used to interpret experiences of violence in their historical contexts. Which terms were — and are — available to describe war, persecution, political repression, or structural and physical violence as a violation of the self — and which experiences remained unnamed? Which concepts of psychological shock or mental suffering were and are used in

medical, state, religious, or cultural contexts — and how do they differ across political regimes, for example under monarchy, fascism, socialism, or in the post-Soviet space? Alongside the reception of international classificatory systems — such as the Western-influenced concept of PTSD — we are also interested in autonomous or lesser-known trauma concepts, such as the Polish “concentration camp syndrome” or region-specific diagnostic practices. Contributions may ask how such concepts emerged, what social interpretive authority they were granted — and which of their limitations, omissions, or translation problems become visible in historical and ethnographic research.

We are further interested in how concepts of the traumatic have shaped both the narration — and the silence — surrounding violence. How are destruction, loss, and emotional distress expressed when no standardised terminology is available? In which situations was — and is — suffering individualised, pathologised, or collectivised — in ethnographic conversations and interviews, in archival sources, or in everyday discourse? And what role do cultural forms of expression — literature, theatre, film, music — play in the formation of alternative languages of trauma?

Contributors are invited to explore these dynamics from historical, ethnographic, or discourse-analytical perspectives and to examine how memory, conceptualisation, and social authority over interpretation intersect.

2. Research Practices

How do we research traumatic experiences in the past and present?

This thematic field raises questions such as: How do researchers engage with emotional and associative transferences of violent and traumatic experiences in research interviews, but also in historical materials? How can these be written about? How can we distinguish between the trauma experienced by research participants, and the emotional burdens of the researchers themselves — and how can analytical distance be created? What methodological and research-ethical extensions are necessary?

How do social discourses and biases shape research, and how can they be addressed? How is research on traumatic experiences influenced by our academic and personal positioning, by our own backgrounds, and by the preconceptions of broader (Western) social discourses?

What role do contemporary witnesses with roots in Eastern Europe play when they themselves conduct research on violence and trauma? How can an empathetic shift in perspective be methodologically justified — ethnographically or historically-anthropologically? And what methodological contributions does ethno-psychoanalysis offer for understanding experiences of trauma within contexts of social power and violence?

3. Collective Memories

What ways of dealing with remembering and forgetting are evident in collective memories?

How does the (post-)genocidal manifest itself in collective remembrance? What role do everyday practices — stories, jokes, songs, myths, films, anecdotes — play in the archiving, preservation, consolidation, overwriting, relativisation, trivialisation, or denial of trauma? What social, political, and cultural dynamics do they generate?

In which places and spaces — sites of violence, lieux de mémoire, arenas of negotiation and mediation, diasporic settings, social media, or art — are memories contested and renegotiated? How do individuals and movements respond to the rewriting and suppression of collective memories of violence?

How are memories of violence approached and transformed? What challenges confront academic and activist forms of memory work? Which theoretical frameworks can guide memory research and the study of violent pasts in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, and what relevance might racism studies (anti-Roma racism, anti-Muslim racism, antisemitism) and decolonial theories hold in this context?

We welcome submissions in English. Abstracts should not exceed 2,000 characters, including spaces. They should contain a concise summary of the content, information on the research context, on technical, methodological and theoretical approaches, and the relevance of the contribution to the conference theme.

We plan to publish the conference proceedings, therefore we expect previously unpublished texts and a willingness to edit your own presentation for publication.

Please send your submissions and any questions to the following email address:

projekt.kulturanthropologie@uni-graz.at

The deadline for submissions is **31st January 2026**.

For precarious and non-institutional presenters, especially from Eastern Europe, we endeavour to cover a proportion of travel and accommodation costs.

The organising team in Graz will select the contributions and compile the programme. Notification of acceptance or rejection will be sent in mid-February 2026.

We look forward to receiving many interesting applications and to an exciting conference!

For the organisers:

Katharina Eisch-Angus, Heike Karge, Kristina Trummer, Medina Velic