

Central European Conference of Historical Geographers

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The traditional meeting of historical geographers from all corners of the world, the International Conference of Historical Geography, is held once every three years. The last occasion was in London in 2015, while the next meeting is planned for Warsaw in 2018. Czech historical geographers associated under the [Historical Geography Research Centre](#) decided to shorten the wait by organising a regional conference: [the Central European Conference of Historical Geographers](#) (CECHG 2016). The conference was held in Prague, Czechia, between 31st August and 2nd September 2016, under the auspices of the Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Faculty of Science at Charles University and the Czech Geographical Society.

Partly thanks to its thematic openness, the conference attracted over one hundred delegates who produced an extremely interesting and rich programme comprising fifty-eight spoken and sixteen poster presentations. The main objective of the event was to reflect on the current challenges and developments in historical geography research in the Central European area in all its diversity. It is thus logical that the majority of the conference participants were researchers from Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the international reach of Czech historical geography was also demonstrated by the large number of participants coming from outside this area (from Belgium, Finland and Israel, for example), who came to Prague mainly through personal contacts with the organisers, or after experiencing the 15th International Conference of Historical Geographers held in Prague in 2012. This meant that eighteen countries in total were represented at the conference.

The programme incorporated traditional themes of historical geography research and methods – historical climatology, medieval and modern landscape, changes in land use, and the history of cartography. More recent themes, involving research into heritage, local identity, region, place, borders, religion and natural hazards, were, however, also richly represented. The conference programme reflected the trend of divergence away from traditional historical geography towards the historicization (or historical consciousness) of current, primarily human-oriented, geographical research agendas. Both plenary lectures addressed this in different ways. In a lecture entitled *Strategies for “surviving” as a historical geographer in Germany after geography’s scientific turn in the late 1970s*, Professor Winfried Schenk (University of Bonn, Germany) argued that the incorporation of historical geographical curricula into the so-called “new cultural geography” is the third and the most recent strategy to carry on historical geographical research within current geographical agendas. However, the former two strategies – interdisciplinarity and adaptation to applied research – should not be abandoned according to Professor Schenk, because they represent a way to sustain historical approaches within a “modernized” geography. The second plenary lecture,

entitled *Europe's cultural diversity as a problem for European integration*, was presented by Professor Peter Jordan (Austrian Academy of Sciences) and focused on considering how historical geographers can contribute to resolving today's problems. In particular, Professor Jordan pointed out that the current crisis of European integration is rooted in cultural differences. These differences originated in the early Middle Ages, long before the bipolar division of Europe into "Western" and "Eastern" blocks that is often canonized as the main cause of contradictions. Going further, he demonstrated how the history of Europe's major cultural differentiation processes had left traces in current economic, social and political attitudes towards problems for European integration.

Fig. 1: CECHG 2016 participants in front of the Karolinum building



Foto: D. Fialová.

The quality of the overall conference programme was ensured not only by the diversity of papers presented, but also by the generous time made available for their discussion, whether as part of or outside special sessions, a phenomenon less and less common in today's accelerating academic world. In addition, the organisers also offered participants a rich social programme, including a tour of the historic auditoriums and halls of the Karolinum – the historical premises of the Charles University whose oldest parts can be dated back to fourteenth century. Another accompanying event was an exhibition entitled *Regions through Space and Time* in the foyer of the Geographical Library of the Charles University. On seventeen panels, authors from the Historical Geography Research Centre presented contemporary approaches to research on the key geographic concept of the region and its various forms and meanings in today's world and in the lives of its inhabitants. The exhibition can be viewed on the [website](#) of the Centre, where one can also find more information about the conference. Last, but not least, a separate event was held in connection with the conference, the prestigious Summer School of the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH), which this year focused on the theme *The Undesirable: How Parasites, Diseases, and Pests Shape Our Environments* (see the separate conference report in this issue).

Overall, CECHG 2016 further underlined the reputation and standing of Czech historical geography. Although the Czech organisers are not planning to build on this successful event themselves, it would without doubt be very useful if somebody else decided to “pick up this gauntlet” and tried to establish a tradition of regular meetings for Central European historical geographers in the interim between worldwide ones.

Fig. 2: Cover panel of the exhibition *Regions through Space and Time* accompanying the conference programme

