

[In memoriam Klaus Zernack](#)

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It deeply saddens me to inform you that Professor Klaus Zernack passed away on November 3, 2017, aged 86. Although he was a distinguished expert of the early Slavic period, his work is probably not as much known in the Anglophone world as it deserves. His influence on scholars of Eastern Europe and especially on East-Central Europe, and on establishing and maintaining institutionalized research in our field in Germany can hardly be overestimated.

Born in 1931, Zernack studied History, Slavistics, German, and Philosophy in West-Berlin, Muenster and Uppsala, Sweden. He earned a doctorate in Muenster in 1957 for a dissertation on Swedish-Russian relations in the second half of the seventeenth century, in particular between 1675 and 1689. The dissertation was published in 1958 and mostly based on Swedish archival sources. It was not a traditional study of bilateral diplomacy, since Zernack considered and analyzed the complex interrelations in the entire region of North and East Europe, demonstrating how Denmark and Brandenburg pushed Muscovy to attack Sweden. In the 1950s, in the ideologically heated up phase of the Cold War, the view that Muscovy's expansion westward correlated and was even facilitated by "Western" powers was not common. Zernack's second book (habilitation), completed in 1964 and printed four years later, was about public assemblies in castle towns among West and East Slavs. The study debunked both the Slavophile and Marxist claims that there existed a common Slavic primal democracy and it demonstrated that the public assemblies of the West Slavs and the *veches* were not linked to each other.

Zernack became professor of East European History at the University of Frankfurt/Main in 1966, he changed to the University of Giessen in 1978, and to Freie Universitaet Berlin in 1984 where he remained until his retirement in 1999. He served as president of the historical commission of Berlin (1986-90) and was a member of the academies of science in Berlin, Poznań, Warsaw, and Stockholm. He received honorary doctorates from the universities of Poznań and Warsaw. Without Zernack's commitment neither the Leipzig Center for the Study of History and Culture of East Central Europe (GWZO) nor the Berlin Center of Historical Studies of the Polish Academy of Science would have been established.

Zernack was one of the first German scholars who criticized the traditional German conception of *Ostforschung*. Based on Oskar Halecki's "The Limits and Divisions of European History" he outlined in his book "Introduction to East European History" of 1978 various sub-regions of Eastern Europe and fields of research which were not based on ideology or national perspectives, but on structural cohesion. The book is so rich of condensed information and insights that hardly any student, in his first years, can fully appreciate its high degree of reflection.

The history of Poland was Zernack's matter of heart. He aimed at overcoming the traditionally pejorative German narrative and at doing historically justice to Germany's immediate eastern neighbor. He coined the term "negative policy toward Poland" that, in his opinion, upheld the fateful alliance of Prussia, Hapsburg, and Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When he, in his university lectures, talked about the "alliance of the three black eagles" suppressing the Polish white one, students could sense his fervor. Friendly but firmly, he admonished those who said "Polish

partitions” instead of “Partitions of Poland”. Despite being aware of a potential embarrassment almost every of his students slipped at one point. In 1972, Zernack took part in setting up the German-Polish Textbook Commission under the umbrella of the UNESCO; he was its member for 45 years, and from 1987 to 2000 its co-president. Zernack’s contributions to an academic reconciliation with Poland are certainly outstanding.

But Zernack was not a historian of Poland in a narrow sense. He always took the entire region if not the entire continent into account. He developed the concept of *Beziehungsgeschichte* that only inadequately translates into “history of relation”. It is, to some extent, a predecessor of what we call “entangled history” today. In his *opus magnum* of 1994, he exemplified this concept with a double biography of Poland and Russia from the early middle ages to the present.

In his lectures in Berlin in the late 1980s, held in a peculiar building called “rust bower”, Zernack frequently reiterated how the Baltic Sea historically connected all its neighboring countries, thus constituting a European region, similar to what Fernand Braudel has established with regard to the Mediterranean Sea. Many in the audience smiled in disbelief about this proposition. It was, from their perspective, a far-fetched comparison and for German students of that time, when Europe was divided between East and West most likely for the subsequent century, the Mediterranean was mentally and emotionally closer than the Baltic Sea. But it was typical for Zernack’s thinking that he tried to make his analysis of the past independent from contemporary politics and short term developments. He always thought in long periods and it was fascinating to listen to him when he, with all the necessary attention to the details, unfolded the course of history over centuries. In doing so, he made Early Slavic Studies relevant even for scholars focusing only on the modern periods. With his passing we lose not only a brilliant scholar, an outstanding teacher and colleague, but also a successful advocate of our field.