In Memoriam Heidemarie Uhl

Obituary

22 Aug 2023

One of Austria’s great historians has left us. Heidemarie Uhl passed away on 11 August 2023 at the age of 66.

Heidemarie Uhl dedicated her life to the critical examination of the consequences and aftermath of the Nazi era in Austria, in particular how Austria’s post-war society dealt with the “Anschluss” in 1938, the “first-victim paradigm”, and the different manifestations and developments of Austrian remembrance culture. Uhl also sat on numerous committees in Austria and abroad, was a member of the Austrian delegation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and an invaluable support to the National Fund, especially during the renewal of the Austrian national exhibition at Auschwitz.

In a guest article marking the Year of Remembrance 2008, entitled Abschied von der Opferthese (“A Departure from the ‘Victim Theory’”), Uhl wrote that the new view of March 1938 as the beginning of Austria’s involvement in the Nazi system of rule was firmly ensconced in the Austrian memory. “In the future, it will likely be necessary to ensure that self-critical reflection on society’s involvement in the Nazi breach of civilisation does not succumb to the torpor of ritualised and routine commemoration.” With Aleida Assmann, Uhl called for special days of remembrance to not only serve the purpose of commemorating identity-forming historical events, but also and above all to instruct new generations in the cultural memory of a society. “Keeping this window of opportunity open for future generations to critically reflect on their own society – and on its culture of remembrance” could be an undertaking for future “years of remembrance”, Uhl said.

She went on to carry out this undertaking with great consistency – among other things, in several projects subsidised by the National Fund: In 2015, for example, with a highly acclaimed exhibition on the Kriegsende 1945 – Verdichtung der Gewalt (“The Last Days of the War, 1945 – the Culmination of Violence”) and in 2018 with the projection art project Zeituhr 1938 (“Timer 1938”) marking the anniversary of the “Anschluss” on 11/12 March 1938, in which around 300 key events of the “Anschluss” were placed in a multi-layered, multi-dimensional context and projected onto the facades of the Federal Chancellery in Vienna and the Landhaus in Klagenfurt. In 2021, on the 80th anniversary of the first Reich-wide deportation transports in October 1941, she was one of the curators of the outdoor exhibition Das Wiener Modell der Radikalisierung. Österreich und die Shoah (“The Vienna Model of Radicalisation. Austria and the Shoah”).

Heidemarie Uhl has influenced and shaped Austria’s critical culture of remembrance in recent decades and she will leave behind a big hole, both as a historian and as a person.

Career

Heidemarie Uhl was born in 1956 and began working as a historian at the University of Graz in 1988. From 1994 to 2000 she worked there on the special focus area “Modernity - Vienna and Central Europe around 1900”. From January 2001 she was a member of the research programme Orte des Gedächtnisses (“Places of Memory”) at the Austrian Academy of Sciences’ Commission for Cultural Studies and Theatre History in Vienna. In 2005 she graduated in General Contemporary History at the University of Graz. In 2009, Heidemarie Uhl was a visiting professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Her main research interests were memory, dealing with the Nazi past, and the theory of cultural studies and culture and identity in Central Europe around 1900.

Links:

- Obiturary Heidemarie Uhl by the IKT of the ÖAW (PDF, in German)