

Baltic Countries in the Eyes of Foreigners

Drawing on documentary sources, Andrea's insightful talk has shown how the Italian intellectual elite used to describe, and thus conceptualise, the Baltic countries over the last century. Edward Said's notion of Orientalism was recruited to explain how the construction of the Other in dominant discourses has affected mainstream perceptions of these countries to this day. Fabled, feared and exoticized, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were described alternatively as a lost paradise and as a place where disorder and filth would reign, with the ideologically-laden implication that it was down to the developed West to civilize them. The sexualisation of these countries, Andrea went on explaining, is not a recent phenomenon, but dates back at least to the 1920s, when it served the twofold purpose of highlighting both the juvenile freshness and subaltern morality of their people. In the interwar period and in the post-Soviet era a more positive image of the Baltic countries emerged, focusing on the courage of its men in an attempt to reconcile two divergent ideologies – capitalism and socialism. After the presentation, an interesting debate followed, with questions being asked on foreigners' perception of neighbouring Slavic countries such as Poland or Belarus. All in all, another nourishing talk, making us more aware of how national identity is not a given essence but at least partly a constructed entity, one very much subjected to the perspective – and sometimes even the prejudice – of others.

Talk by Andrea Griffante, 7 November 2018

Report by Davide Castiglione, 13 November 2018