

The End of the Soviet Union? Origins and Legacies of 1991

Veranstalter: Maike Lehmann / Susanne Schattenberg, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa Bremen

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New historical fields come and go, but it is probably fair to say that of the ones that endure, Russian history has undergone some of the most profound change during the past quarter-century. This applies not least to those periods of history that get the lion's share of scholarly attention. Since the opening of the Soviet archives, historians have progressively been moving forward in time, beginning with the Russian Revolution onward. At first the 1920s and 1930s became the new center of gravity, while during the late 1990s and early 2000s this center moved to the war years and the early post-Stalinist period. At present we are witnessing a marked shift to the Brezhnev years and the 1980s, a shift that was accelerated by the twentieth anniversaries of 1989 and now - 1991. It is within this context that the conference „The End of the Soviet Union? Origins and Legacies of 1991,“ held on 19-21 May 2011 at Forschungsstelle Osteuropa in Bremen, a unique institute with extensive archival holdings on post-Stalin dissent in Eastern Europe and the USSR, seeks to make its mark.

This Volkswagen Foundation-funded conference was convened by Maike Lehmann (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa Bremen, FSO) and Susanne Schattenberg, the director of the Forschungsstelle. Based on pre-circulated papers, the conference featured an impressive cast of scholars from a variety of countries (esp. the U.S., Germany, and Britain) and disciplines (history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and literary studies). Periodization was the first important theme that crystallized at the conference. The question mark in the conference title was appreciated by many participants; a consensus favored continuity over rupture. The continuity thesis emerged early on from introductory remarks by Schattenberg and ALEXEI

YURCHAK (University of Californiar, Berkeley), whose „Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation“ (Princeton UP, 2005) was likely the most cited - explicitly and implicitly - work at the conference.¹ Yurchak offered an explanation of the longevity of the Soviet Union that hinged on Claude Lefort's theory of political sovereignty, arguing that Leninism was invoked as the stable ideological reference point to which every generation could return after Stalin's, Khrushchev's, or Brezhnev's „aberrations.“ The continuity thesis also underpinned the paper of anthropologist ANDREA WEISS (Central European University, Budapest), who noted in her 2008-09 fieldwork on (informal) economic practices in Georgian Mingrelia that the late Soviet varieties of clientelism persisted beyond 1991. Similarly, historian MORITZ FLORIN (University of Hamburg) found a remarkable stability of Soviet identity among contemporary Kyrgyz elites, who define themselves via the Russian language vis-à-vis those Kyrgyz citizens who no longer have (or never had) a command of Russian in this former Soviet republic. Voices disagreeing with the continuity trend were STEPHEN BITTNER (Sonoma State University) and Karl Schlögel. Bittner highlighted the similarities between the search for pre- and post-1989 continuities and the privileging of continuities in histories of the Russian Revolution that has been predominant for two decades, and made a case for refocusing on the discontinuous elements instead. Schlögel emphasized the importance of *histoire événementielle*, drawing attention to the palpable acceleration that characterized the 1989-91 period, along with the acute sense of rupture felt by everyone after the events. Nevertheless, the participants kept returning to the question of continuities, for instance when the sociologist ANNA PARETSKAYA (University of Wisconsin-Madison) in her pa-

¹ The other work that has cast doubt on the narrative of dissident-led Eastern European „velvet revolutions“ and that has emphasized the persistence of communist elites beyond 1989-91 both in Eastern Europe and the USSR is Stephen Kotkin, with a contribution by Jan T. Gross, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, New York 2009; Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*, New York 2008.

per on the late Soviet homo sovieticus - „the lazy, cowardly, and selfish,” in the words of a Brezhnev-era citizen - showed how practices from 1970s consumer culture and leisure, when transferred to the political sphere during Perestroika, helped implode the Soviet Union.

There was also a distinct trend to call into question the binaries that have shaped the field's analytical instruments and interpretive frameworks. GLEB TSIPURSKY (Ohio State University, Newark), for instance, criticized the public/private binary in his talk on the *narodnye družiny*, Komsomol volunteer youth militias who patrolled the neighborhoods of many Soviet cities from the 1950s onward, including Saratov, the site of Tsipursky's local study. According to Tsipursky, these militias were not perceived as part of „power” or „the state,” but rather of both. Political scientist Heiko Pleines commented that boundaries may be blurred, borders porous, and binaries obsolete, but that this kind of critique did not absolve us from the search for more adequate analytical categories. BENJAMIN NATHANS (University of Pennsylvania) made a plea to actually reinsert binaries, esp. those binaries structuring the thought and actions of the historical actors - after all dialectics was the procrustean bed in which Marxist-Leninist ideology was forged. What is more, MAXIM WALDSTEIN (Leiden) reported on what commentator Stephen Lovell called a „binary fest,” the Moscow-Tartu School and the academic infighting as well as the strategies of inclusion and exclusion deployed by Yuri Lotman and his fellow semioticians.

Given the reticence to resort to binaries in how we make sense of the recent Soviet past it was only logical that many papers insisted on the „hybridity” of cultural forms and mnemonic practices. MAIKE LEHMANN (FSO Bremen) most explicitly invoked Homi Bhabha in her paper on the blending of Soviet universalist and Armenian particularist forms, instantiated in the 1965 demonstration that clamored for Armenian genocide recognition. At the climactic demonstration on 24 April, the activists deftly used Soviet rituals (May Day demonstrations) and Soviet spaces (Lenin Square with its Lenin monu-

ment instead of Opera Square) to advance their - anti-Soviet - cause, the institutionalization of the memory of 1915, which was a taboo subject in official Soviet discourse. In a similar vein, ELISA GARCIA (University of Aarhus) described the Putin-inspired post-2000 cult of Alexander Solzhenitsyn as a „hybrid memory culture”; the anthropologist GEDIMINAS LANKAUSKAS (University of Regina) spoke of a „heteroglossaic or multivoiced mnemoscape” in his paper on the *bunker*, a popular Soviet-era bunker in Vilnius that features paid reenactment, including a live KGB interrogation, a visit to a Soviet dentist, and vodka drinking; and SERGUEI OUSHAKINE (Princeton University) characterized recent post-Soviet memory practices of the Second World War, such as the distribution of St. George lents (a new, invented symbol), as a „palimpsest.”

The emphasis on hybridity was so pronounced that the concept of „resistance” hardly came up. „Resistance” has lost traction in recent years because it implies that resisters were, somehow, not products of Soviet society.² Yet the question remains how those who risked their lives in fighting for human rights should enter the histories written by us, who at most risk breaking our armchairs. This question was pregnant in Benjamin Nathans' paper on „dissident memoirs,” published both in samizdat and abroad. Nathans delineated the methods of production and circulation of these memoirs and distilled the recurring topoi, such as „encounters with the KGB” (from apartment searches to interrogations) as a litmus test of character. Karl Schlögel, together with sociologist David Lane, the only conference participant old enough to have consciously lived through the 1970s and a participant of Yuri Levada's underground sociological seminars in Moscow, indirectly also touched on this question when taking issue with Waldstein's notion of „parallel science,” with the depiction in Susanne Schattenberg's paper of Brezhnev - contra Roy Medvedev - as a talented power politician who skillfully pulled strings and oper-

² Resistance and its (more or less implicit) counterpart, accommodation, has been prominent in Stalinist history. See, for example, Michael David-Fox / Peter Holquist / Marshall Poe (eds.), *The Resistance Debate in Russian and Soviet History*, Bloomington 2003.

ated clientelist networks, and with NIKOLAI MITROKHIN's (FSO Bremen) portrayal of the Central Committee apparatchiki as surprisingly well-educated and effective managers. To Schlögel, these revisionist moves went too far: Levada's enterprise wasn't „parallel to“ but decidedly „against“ the establishment, and there was a widespread sense among critical intelligentsia that the late Soviet elites were corrupt and inept, and that „stagnation“ described the situation quite well. I cannot help but continue to wonder how to bring these views together, how to inscribe in our histories the irreducible gap between dissidents and us without resorting to a language of resistance and heroism. To me, this seems a major ethical, narrative, and conceptual problem that historians will continue to grapple with.³

Likewise there were some calls for a new event-based, „real“ history. Schlögel, for instance, showed signs of impatience with the more sociological papers on the 1990s, making an impassioned plea for scholars to „experience“ history in the making, to hit, if they were able to do it all over again, the road and to get on real trucks and on real airplanes, filled with „bag people“ who during the 90s travelled between Moscow and Shanghai, bringing back in their striped bags down jackets to be sold in the bazaars. This amounted to an advocacy of the seemingly moribund category of experience, which is in line with a recent trend in the field of history that seeks, in Harold Mah's words, „to recover an idea of experience as a pretheorized, prediscursive, direct encounter with others, with society, or with the past.“⁴

The fresh research presented at the conference not only introduced new issues and frameworks, but also new sources. Two source genres stood out prominently: First, oral history was well represented by, for example, ADRIENNE EDGAR (University of California, Santa Barbara) and SAULE UALIYEVA (East Kazakhstan State Technical University), who, in their paper on interethnic marriage in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, came to the conclusion that the present Kazakh state is essentially continuing to foster the practice of high rates of intermarriage by forging a supra-ethnic Kazakh identity that in many

ways resembles that of the Soviet Union and its celebrated „friendship of peoples.“ MANFRED ZELLER (FSO Bremen) in his paper on the Moscow soccer fan movement, 1976-2011, also heavily relied on interviews with fans. He detailed the introduction of Western soccer fan culture in the 1970s and the fans' turn to extreme violence when the Soviet power prohibited this fan culture - a consequence that the authorities had certainly not intended, and one which contrasted with the split in violent and non-violent clubs in the West, where the police did not wage an all-out war against fans. And Nikolai Mitrokhin based his talk (cited above) on more than one-hundred long, in-depth interviews he conducted with surviving members of the Communist Party's Central Committee apparatus, 1953-1985. The second genre very much in fashion is that of Soviet sociological opinion research.⁵ MIRIAM DOBSON (University of Sheffield) examined the study of religious belief by the Institute of Scientific Atheism, founded by the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1964. She concluded that this research on believers discovered the paradoxical co-existence of, on the one hand, acceptance of Soviet contemporary life and, on the other, hope for a Christian afterlife. She also noted an unintended consequence: rather than spreading atheism, this type of research - open-ended, individual conversations with believers - may actually have fortified existing religious beliefs by lending these beliefs the status of a social-scientific „fact.“

A final issue the conference returned to time and again - from Schattenberg's paper on Brezhnev to Claudia Weber's commentary on the concluding discussion - was that of the

³The fact that historians in other fields have started to think again about „moral history“ suggests that the days of the hybridity trend may be numbered. See, most recently, George Cotkin, „History's Moral Turn,“ In: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): pp. 293-315.

⁴Harold Mah, „The Predicament of Experience,“ In: *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no. 1 (2008): p. 99. Frank Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford 2005) best exemplifies this trend.

⁵The rediscovery of this material goes hand in hand with the celebration of „independent“ or „underground“ sociology in recent years. See, for example, *Vospominaniia i diskussii o Iurii Aleksandroviche Levade*, Moscow 2010.

need to situate the post-Stalin Soviet period in wider transnational contexts, esp. the Cold War. To be sure, some of the presenters did so quite deliberately, such as the anthropologist ANNA GELTZER (Cornell University), who studied the turn to imported „evidence-based medicine“ (EBM) in postsocialist times. KEVIN PLATT (University of Pennsylvania) argued in favor of seeing the links both ways, not just from post-Soviet Russia to the outside world, but also from the outside world - „us“ - to Russia. Platt contends that the post-Soviet era came to a close toward the end of Putin's first presidential term, and that this end coincided with the end of the posthistorical, defined as the triumph of liberal capitalism and „the end of history,“ in the West.⁶ It is this „post-post“ temporal landscape which we still inhabit and which will shape the way we access the recent Eurasian past for some time to come. And it is this temporal landscape which made this exciting conference on „The End of the Soviet Union?“ possible in the first place.

Conference overview:

Round Table - Origins and Legacies of 1991

Chair: Susanne Schattenberg
(Forschungsstelle Osteuropa Bremen, FSO / University of Bremen)

Stephen Bittner (Sonoma State University)
Kevin Platt (University of Pennsylvania)
Alexei Yurchak (University of California at Berkeley)

(Post)Soviet Politics. Leaders and Elites

Chair: Heiko Pleines (FSO Bremen)

Susanne Schattenberg (FSO Bremen / University of Bremen): Dnepropetrovsk in Power. Brezhnev's Rule as Synthesis of Stalin's and Khrushchev's Leadership

Nikolay Mitrokhin (FSO Bremen): (Former) Members of CC Apparatus and the Demise of the Soviet Union

Discussants: Claudia Weber (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, Hamburg) / David Lane (Cambridge University)

(Post)Soviet Politics. Social Movements

Chair: Karl Schlögel (Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin)

Benjamin Nathans (University of Pennsylvania): The Self as Other. Soviet Dissident Memoirs

Miriam Dobson (University of Sheffield): Religious Belief and the Social Sciences in the 1960s

Discussants: Serguei Oushakine (University of Princeton) & Alexandra Oberländer (University of Bremen)

(Post)Soviet Practices. Mobilizing Citizens

Chair: Manfred Zeller (FSO Bremen)

Gleb Tsipursky (The Ohio State University, Newark): Komsomol Patrols. Soviet Volunteer Youth Militias in Saratov, 1954-1964

Maike Lehmann (FSO Bremen/University of Bremen): Mobilization for a Common Cause. (Soviet) Worldviews and their Legacies on the National Periphery

Discussants: Juliane Fürst (University of Bristol) / Susan Reid (University of Sheffield)

(Post)Soviet Practices. Politics of the Everyday

Chair: Alice Szczepanikova (Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main)

Anna Paretskaya (University of Wisconsin-Madison): The Politics of Smallest Things. How „Lazy, Cowardly, and Selfish“ Changed the Soviet Union

Andrea Weiss (Central European University Budapest): Trajectories of Economic Practices. Clientelist Networks and the State in Mingrelia

Discussants: Walter Sperling (Ruhr-University of Bochum) / Heiko Pleines (FSO Bremen)

On the Margins. (Post)Soviet Identity Politics
Chair: Stephen Bittner (Sonoma State University)

Moritz Florin (University of Hamburg): Soviet Persons. Elites, the Russian Language and Soviet Identity in Kyrgyzstan, 1953-2011

⁶See Kevin M. F. Platt, „The Post-Soviet is Over: On Reading the Ruins,“ In: Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts 1, no. 1 (May 1, 2009): <<http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/41>> (27.06.2011).

Edgar, Adrienne (University of California at Santa Barbara) / Saule Ualiyeva (East Kazakhstan State Technical University): Ethnic Inter-marriage, Mixed People, and 'Druzhba Narodov' in Soviet and Post-Soviet Kazakhstan 09.07.2011.

Discussants: Otto Habeck (Max-Planck-Institute for Social Anthropology Halle) / Kristin Roth-Ey (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London)

Cultural Codes. The (Post)Soviet Empire of Signs

Chair: Alexei Yurchak (University of California at Berkeley)

Maxim Waldstein (Leiden University): Parallel Science and Late Soviet Academia. The Case of Tartu Semiotics

Anna Geltzer (Cornell University): A Failure of Imagination? The Crisis of Professional Identity in Russian Biomedicine

Manfred Zeller (FSO Bremen): Knitting the Polysemic Scarf. The Emergence of what we now call fanatskoe dvizhenie (fanatical movement) in Late Soviet Moscow, 1976-2011

Discussants: Stephen Lovell (King's College) / Malte Rolf (University of Hannover)

The Post-Soviet Life of Soviet Symbols

Chair: Alexandra Oberländer (University of Bremen)

Elisa Ruiz Velasco Garcia (University of Aarhus): A Soviet Dissident as Symbol of Russia? The Canonization of Solzhenitsyn in Recent Russian Memory Culture

Gediminas Lankauskas (University of Regina): On Complications of Postsocialist Amnesia in Lithuania

Serguei Oushakine (Princeton University): Affective Management. Remembering the Second World War in Russia

Discussants: Jan Plamper (Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin) / Kevin Platt (University of Pennsylvania)

Tagungsbericht *The End of the Soviet Union? Origins and Legacies of 1991*. 19.05.2011-21.05.2011, Bremen, in: H-Soz-u-Kult