Ein goldenes Zeitalter der Stagnation? Perspektiven auf die Brežnev-Zeit 1964-1982

Veranstalter: Boris Belge / Martin Deuerlein
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In the historiography of twentieth century Russia, the last three decades of the Soviet Union stands out as a lacuna. Usually associated with contradictory concepts – stagnation or stability, economic crisis or the golden age of Soviet-style consumption, social differentiation or ideological cohesion, Cold War or international cooperation – the period dubbed by Soviet ideologists „developed socialism" remains a highly controversial though understudied period. A team of doctoral students based in Tübingen – Boris Belge and Martin Deuerlein – decided that the time had come to tackle the burning issues of late Soviet rule by convening an intensive workshop of young scholars in the old university town. They asked mainly how people managed their lives between the two extreme attitudes of adherence and dissent; what remained of optimistic visions of the future offered by communist ideology; and whether the qualification „stagnation" was adequate to describe „real socialism".

After a brief introduction and welcome by both conveners Belge, Deuerlein, and the Director of the Institute for East-European History and Geography Klaus Gestwa (Tübingen), SUSANNE SCHATTENBERG (Bremen) dedicated her keynote speech to Leonid Brezhnev as leader. She presented the audience with a surprising and complex biography of Brezhnev. Schattenberg revisited the usual qualification of Brezhnev as „weak" leader and proposed a new interpretation of his insistence on „cadre stability". The General Secretary indeed showed great political virtuosity and might in becoming the *primus inter pares* and eliminating potential political competitors. Schattenberg explains his relaxed nature and attentiveness towards close friends and associates (as seen in recently published dacha photographs) as an effort to create a system of leadership based on familiarity and inter-dependence of (not seldom corrupt) functionaries and party secretaries.

Even as communist mantras began to lose their credibility and weight after Khrushchev, the Soviet regime still utilized forms and patterns of mobilization born in the first decades of the Soviet regime. A first panel made this important insight clear by bringing together studies of model cities and urban projects typical of the Brezhnev Era. City-projects deployed visions of the future in sciences and the arts, promised social ascension and a privilege living for their dwellers, and fostered patriotism.

However closed and militarized Severodvinsk (the main atom submarine shipyard on the White Sea) was, the inhabitants of the city and workers of the secret facilities managed to buy western products on the black market and to meet foreigners, as EKATERINA EMELIANTSEVA (Bangor) insisted. In this outpost of the Cold War, interaction between citizens and the authorities became less formal and more and more personalized, leading to what Emeliantseva calls „flexible socialism".

STEFAN GUTH (Bern) presented evolving visions of the future that architects and planners projected on the model city of Shevchenko, located on the shore of the Caspian Sea in Soviet Kazakhstan. Hailed as an atomic oasis in the desert and as the vanguard of the Soviet „scientific-technological revolution" (*nauchno-tekhnicheskaia revoliutsiia*), Shevchenko is for Guth an example of the technocratization of the Soviet system from the 1960s onward. He showed that futurologist thinking is still at work nowadays as the city endures Dubai-like reconstruction under the name Aktau in independent Kazakhstan.

Another case study of urban mobilization patterns under „developed socialism" is Naberezhnye Chelny in Tatarstan. The automobile industry was at the heart of the transformation of a village into an industrial metropolis. ESTHER MEIER (Hamburg) showed that the truck manufacturer KamAZ offered rapid social ascension to a mainly

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Tatar rural population moving to the prefabricated multistory housing complexes. However, the promises that came along with urbanization went unfulfilled as professional advancement proved limited and incomplete, and Russification loomed large.

IVO MIJNSSEN (Basel) analyzed how the creation of thirteen „hero cities" contributed to the memorial mobilization around the Great Patriotic War. The broader context for this development was not only the cult of the war, but also the perception amongst the political leadership that the gap between the youth and the war generation was widening: the new generation appeared apolitical and disinterested in the glorious deeds of its fathers. On the basis of two case studies – Novorossiisk and Tula – Mijnssen showed that memorial tourism in cities presented as having suffered the most during the war was deemed to contribute to the patriotic education of children of the baby boom.

Discussant JOHANNES GRUETZMACHER (Stuttgart) underlined the precariousness of the social contract at the heart of many model city projects: inhabitants exchanged material prosperity for political stability, but authorities could unilaterally revoke the deal. The room for maneuver that the authorities conceded to the citizenry was equally shaky.

A second panel put the focus on the national peripheries of the Soviet Union, where Soviet leaders sought new venues to strengthen the empire's cohesion. Both panelists showed that in the small republics of Estonia and Kirghizia the regime was able to create cohesion in the local population and the elite either by protecting the republican patriotic intelligentsia (as in Kirghizia), or by mobilizing the inhabitants around a Soviet and international project in Estonia.

MORITZ FLORIN (Hamburg) drew attention to a new generation of Kirghiz filmmakers and writers who were able to express concern over Russification, environmental destruction and the loss of Kirghiz identity. Florin shows that, similarly to the policy of including „nationalist" intellectuals in the official structures of literature and the arts in Russia, the Kirghiz political leaders protected the Kirghiz „nationalist" cultural elite in the 1970s.

Although Soviet identity was more incompatible with Estonian identity in the Baltic republic, CAROL MARMOR (Munich) showed how the transformation of the Estonian capital Tallinn into an Olympic city welcoming the sailing and rowing disciplines for the 1980 Olympics enjoyed broad support among the local population. International sports, corporal culture as much as „Soviet fraternity" was able to mobilize the inhabitants for the Soviet project, as Marmor contended.

In his commentary, MARC ELIE (Paris) stressed that both panelists revealed two main changes in the life of the republics in the 1960s-1980s: the consolidation of republican identity, allowing First Secretaries to aggregate powerful networks and to escape the role of mere prefects of Moscow; and a second wave of indigenization furthering the social ascension of representatives of „titular nationalities".

The image of an inert state and party pervades literature on the Brezhnev Era: as leaders aged, the structure of power from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy became more conservative of its control prerogatives and material privileges. The third panel devoted to Soviet institutions challenged this view.

Institutions of arts like the Union of compositors were not static, argues BORIS BELGE. He showed that the young generation of compositors around Alfred Schnittke, Sofiia Gubaidulina and Edison Denisov benefited from the logistical and institutional support of the direction and *apparat* of the the Union. Indeed, the leaders of the Union around Tikhon Khrennikov tried not to alienate the new creative forces, given that in the cultural Cold War the Soviet Union had already lost ground in the field of rock-and-roll, rock and beat. The younger generation succeeded in modifying the inner relationships in the Union and in bringing about a silent change in contemporary music long before Gorbachev.

JULIAN MÜHLBAUER (Gießen) claimed that the official institution of petition grew in importance under Brezhnev. Using the example of Bielorussia, he argued that the „signals from below" were more than a mere „affective barometer of public opinion" or „outlet

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for discontent". Mühlbauer defended the thesis that the growth and institutionalization of the petition system (it was formalized in the 1977 constitution) was a mobilization praxis inviting people to participate to the public affairs at the very lowest level.

In contrast, KATHARINA UHL (Oxford) documented that institutions could indeed lose their spirit under „developed Socialism". Uhl drew attention to the end of the Thaw in the Communist Youth Organization (Komsomol). Organizational reforms of the late Khrushchev era were, as in other Party structures, quickly revoked after the demise of their initiator. In place of these revitalizing efforts, a new trend set in: regularly-organized mass-events endowed with a new solemnity directed Komsomol members toward economic objectives and the cult of war heroes.

In her commentary, MAIKE LEHMANN (Bremen) stressed that the panelists had made clear that institutions were not stagnant, but often presented a gray facade masking transformations. She advised against seeking evidence of „stagnation" in the study of the Brezhnev Era.

The last panel dealt with how actors perceived and interacted with the world outside of the Soviet Union. The panelists moved away from the traditional study of international relations by looking at non-traditional actors and unusual situations of negotiation.

MARTIN DEUERLEIN (Tübingen) brought to the fore the *mezhdunarodniki* (that is, experts in international relations and foreign countries) in the central committee, the ministry of foreign affairs, the KGB and the ministry of defense. Deuerlein showed how patrons like KGB President Iurii Andropov and central committee international department director, Boris Ponomarev, created teams of *mezhdunarodniki* to gain non-ideological expertise outside the usual channels. After a period of optimism based on the success of the Soviet Union on the world stage and the economic crisis in the West, the *mezhdunarodniki* lost faith in the Soviet project in the second half of the 1970s when the structural economic and social problems went unresolved.

In studies on Soviet dissent, most attention had been on human-right activists (*pravozashchitniki*). EWGENIY KASAKOW (Bremen) turned to another tendency amongst dissidents: leftist groups often born in universities. Leftists came to the fore after Andropov's police crushed the classical dissidents in the second half of the 1970s. In contrast to *pravozashchitniki* (and against the image of a depoliticized Soviet Union), the underground leftists were heavily politicized. In addition, in cases such as the board of the illegal journal *Perspektiva* in Leningrad or Raslatskii's group in Kuibyshev, they had little to no international contacts. However, in their critique of both capitalism and real socialism they were influenced by the New Left and Eurocommunism.

JULIA METGER (Berlin) analyzed how intercultural communication between Soviet and West German diplomats evolved in the crucial years of the Helsinki Agreement (1975). How did interpretation and explanation models change in diplomatic negotiations? Metger took the case of potentially conflict-ridden situations concerning foreign correspondents working in the Soviet Union. She showed that the traditional argumentation of reciprocity was substantially modified by a new discourse on the necessity to better the relationship between West Germany and the Soviet Union.

In his comments, KLAUS GESTWA (Tübingen) underlined that all papers brought together inner and outer changes, showing how interrelated they were, in spite of the „Iron Curtain". Both the underground left (which was repressed by the regime) and *mezhdunarodniki* (experts fostered by the regime) constituted critical groups that acted within the system in connection with what they perceived and understood of the world outside.

PHILIPP KOHL (Berlin) offered the last presentation, showing how Brezhnev is represented in today's Russian culture. Kohl applied his aesthetic analysis to Sergei Snezhkin's movie serials *Brezhnev* (2005) and Ol'ga Slavnikova's novel *Bessmertnyi* (2001). Kohl showed how artists evade the stagnation paradigm to reach a personal Brezhnev. To show how Brezhnev lived and felt, they pierce the mask of oldness and decay.

In a lively concluding discussion, the participants underlined that there was still a lot

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to do to better understand the transformations of Soviet society in the second half of the twentieth century. Opening the discussion, Belge stated that „normalcy“ - a word historians often offer as context for the Brezhnev Era – should not be used as analytical concept but should be put into question as a discursive construction, as much as „stagnation“. This remark fired again the central debate over the general quality and meaning of the Brezhnev years. Some held tight to the thesis that, notwithstanding the deep social transformations of the 1960s-1980s, the aging regime refused to take the necessary structural reforms to solve the central lacunae in the economy, society and the environment. From this point of view, Perestroika appears as the coming to power of reform-minded technocrats whose critical voices had remained mainly inaudible under Brezhnev. Others suggested a change in perspective: they insisted that the focus should be directed toward systemic social changes and growing differentiation (notwithstanding the immutable political regime) in the Brezhnev era. Seen as such, Perestroika is the natural result of greater social differentiation. If the workshop could not solve this contradiction, it at least more clearly defined the terms of debate.

Conference Overview

Öffentlicher Abendvortrag

Susanne Schattenberg (Bremen): Brežnev Revisited

Panel 1: Mobilisierung

Ekaterina Emeliantseva (Bangor): Flexibler Sozialismus der späten Brežnev-Zeit: Freizeit und Konsum in der geschlossenen Stadt Severodvinsk

Stefan Guth (Bern): Vergangene Zukunft: Die wissenschaftlich-technische Revolution, das Atom und die Stadt der Zukunft zwischen Systemwettbewerb und –konvergenz

Esther Meier (Hamburg): Soziale Mobilität und kultureller Wandel in der Brežnev-Ära: Das Großprojekt KamAZ/Naberežnye Čelny

Ivo Mijnsen (Basel): Leben in der Heldenstadt: Die Nachkriegsgeneration in der Brežnev-Ära

Kommentar: Johannes Grützmacher (Stuttgart)

Panel 2: Peripherien

Moritz Florin (Hamburg): „Bei uns gab es keine Dissidenten.“ Zentralasiatische Intellektuelle in Brežnevs goldenem Zeitalter

Carol Marmor (München): Vom zastoj zur perestrojka? Novostrojka 1980 in Moskau und in Tallinn

Kommentar: Marc Elie (Paris)

Panel 3: Institutionen

Boris Belge (Tübingen): Rituale und Beschwörungen: Der sowjetische Komponistenverband zwischen vertrauten Parolen und bedrohlichen Herausforderungen, 1974-1982

Julian Mühlbauer (Gießen): Konfliktregulierung und Partizipation im „Entwickelten Sozialismus“. Die BSSR im Spiegel von Eingaben und Beschwerden

Katharina Uhl (Oxford): Wann endet das Tauwetter im Komsomol?

Kommentar: Maike Lehmann (Bremen)

Panel 4: Die Sowjetunion inter- und transnational

Martin Deuerlein (Tübingen): Die Meždunarodniki und die Krise der Détente, 1975-80

Evgenij Kasakov (Bremen): Das Wiederaufkommen der linken oppositionellen Gruppen in der späten Brežnev-Zeit (1975-1982)

Julia Metger (Berlin): „Reziprozität oder die Schlussakte von Helsinki? Argumentationsmuster in den Kontroversen um die westdeutschen Moskau-Korrespondenten, 1964-82“

Kommentar: Klaus Gestwa (Tübingen)

Philipp Kohl (Berlin): Masken des Stillstands – Über Brežnev-Bilder nach 2000

Abschlussdiskussion: Perspektiven auf die Brežnev-Zeit

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