From a Totalitarian State to an Open Society? De-Stalinisation in the Soviet Union

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As THOMAS BOHN (Gießen) stated in his opening remarks at the conference which he organized, together with MICHEL ABESSER (Freiburg) and RAYK EINAX (Gießen), for a long time everything seemed to have already been said about de-Stalinisation. There was a clear consensus about the characteristics of Soviet history in the 1950s and 1960s which were seen to include the repudiation of personal dictatorship and mass terror, the rehabilitation of the Party, the maintenance of the planned economy and collectivized agriculture, and the cultural policies of the thaw. Lately, in the light of new results arising from an intensified scientific interest, the need to re-evaluate such seemingly established knowledge has become clear. As a result, this conference aimed to provide new perspectives on the relationship between state and society in the post-war Soviet Union, assembling historians from Russia, Great Britain and Germany to present the results of their ongoing or recently concluded research. The conference was structured around the term 'open society', which had been established by Karl Popper in order to compare the West to socialist Europe. The question was raised as to whether the dichotomy could provide a valuable tool for describing the ways in which Soviet society developed after Nikita Khrushchev's accession to power in 1956, with private and public lives drifting apart.

In his opening lecture, STEFAN PLAGGENBORG (Bochum) focused on continuities and discontinuities in the post-Stalinist era. According to him, while the 1950s and 1960s were marked by a distancing from Stalinist legacies on a cultural and political level, the remaining structures of Stalinism – albeit never effectively working – put narrow limits on any changes or reforms. During the reign of Brezhnev, politics turned to the restoration of Stalinist infrastructures. On the whole, Plaggenborg characterized de-Stalinisation as a period of „Stalinism under repair", during which Soviet leaders sought to correct and improve the numerous deficits and structural problems of Stalinist rule. According to him, there was no shift taking place towards an open society, but rather a development towards a society consisting of the sum of small collectives.

The question of ruptures and continuities was also taken up in the first panel, which dealt with the relations between the Soviet powers and society and which put an emphasis on post-Stalinist society management strategies. It demonstrated that Khrushchev's social policy was quite complex and contradictory, and that it could neither be described as liberalisation nor as the mere continuation of Stalinist politics of societal control. THOMAS BOHN (Gießen) showed, that the intention to limit the growth of industrial towns to a certain size – established at the 20th Party Congress of the CPDSU in 1956 – and the, closed cities system' which resulted from these measures, added a dimension to de-Stalinization which was to have more impact on the development of Soviet society in the long run than the cultural and political thaw commonly associated with Khrushchev's name: the temporary opening of society was accompanied by a permanent closure of the cities.

A sceptical glance on the impact of the thaw on society was also thrown by JULIANE FÜRST (Bristol). Exploring public poetry-readings organized by young people at Maiakovskaia Square in Moscow and their impact and meaning for youth culture, she discussed the extent to which one might speak of a de-Stalinization of Soviet youth. Her presentation revealed paradoxical results: While the youth underwent fundamental changes from Brezhnev to Khrushchev, these did not result from liberalisation but from its failure. Young people reacted enthusiastically to the promises of the thaw, but their reactions were shaped by a rhetoric – renewal, recovery of the revolutionary spirit, youth as the guardian

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of socialism – which dated from Stalinism and even the 1920s. It was only when they felt deceived by liberalisation that young people turned away from those ideals and, according to Fürst, they were 'de-Stalinized' not by Khrushchev but by „the wear and tear of the Soviet fabric that did not have enough elasticity."

On the other hand, MELANIE ILIC (Birmingham) und GALINA IVANOVA (Moscow) gave examples for fundamental changes in the relationship between the Party and the people. In their respective discussions on the revival of the women's question and social politics under Khrushchev, they showed that it was no longer sufficient just to control the development of society. This aim was now accompanied by the need to create legitimacy, which led to extensive welfare programs in the case of social politics and the reopening of the women's question through new policies concerning family life, female workers and the support of women's interests through women's councils, even if these interests were defined by the Party rather than by women themselves. In this aim, the Soviet state was not always able to live up to its own expectations: Ivanova described the social politics of the Khrushchev-era as reactive rather than coherent, while Ilic stated that, upon closer examination, the implementation and outcome of policies concerning gender equality was limited. In terms of social policy, as DIETMAR NEUTATZ (Freiburg) commented, besides many continuities, a new interest in Soviet citizens, their needs and wishes, can also be identified which is not properly covered by the term of de-Stalinization.

The second panel focused on the topic of communication between the Party, party organs and Soviet citizens. While JURIJ AKSJUTIN (Moscow) employed retrospective surveys from the 1990s to explore the 'tacit majority's' opinions about crucial political events from the 1950s to the 1970s, STEPHAN MERL (Bielefeld) argued that Soviet rule, from the 1930s up to the very end, was stabilized by a specific type of political communication, based on the promise of an earthly paradise in the shape of communism on the one hand, and on the systematic inclusion of the population on the other, brought about by making them take part in public rituals but also by making them break rules and thus compromise themselves. Using this model to analyse the post-Stalin years, he postulated that de-Stalinization was in fact quite limited in its effects. Although Khrushchev broke some of the unwritten rules of the communication system, and thus caused a temporary destabilization, a real change of the system did not take place, as the mechanisms of inclusion into dictatorship kept working. At the end of the day, according to Merl, de-Stalinization has to be considered as a period of transition from one state of stable soviet dictatorship to the next. SIMON HUXTABLE (London) presented some results from his research into communication between journalists of Komsolmolskaia Pravda and their readers. He demonstrated how considering a problem from a grassroots perspective may lead to new insights about already-known phenomena: according to his findings, it was less the end of the political thaw which led to a banalisation of the press in the Brezhnev-era, and more the new ways in which journalists looked at their readers. While during the 1950s journalists had considered their readers as objects to educate and enlighten, this attitude changed in the 1960s: by the end of the decade, the reader was considered as a consumer, whose preferences had to be taken into account. Readership surveys showed, however, that readers were more interested in sensation and entertainment than in education and political debates. In his commentary, SERGEI ZHURAVLEV (Moscow) stressed, that the soviet 1960ies also saw tendencies towards individualization, which should not be underestimated.

The third panel connected to the second one in so far as it showed that communication between the Soviet powers and the population was also an important feature in the cultural sphere. For example, MARIA ZEZINA (Moscow) emphasized that, during the Khrushchev era, Soviet writers did not merely react to political power, and that they should also be considered as actors in their own right. In her paper on the development of literary accounts of the Stalinist past from the 1950s and 1960s, POLLY JONES (London) described

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a discourse of memory which included confrontation with the trauma caused by terror, mourning for its victims and lustration. According to Jones, these phenomena are not to be considered as 'counter-memory', but were part of official memorial culture. In its openness and intensity, Soviet debate about the events of the 1930s and 1940s sometimes even went further than similar discussions in western countries.

MICHEL ABESSER (Freiburg) described how jazz music was tamed by a change in the ways it was performed and consumed, adapting to Soviet imaginations of proper leisure. Jazz was professionalized and given an educational framework, and it was no longer performed at dance venues, but for an audience which was seated to listen. This helped to develop jazz music from a pleasure which had been considered as somewhat subversive and dissident into a part of officially approved middle-class leisure. ALEXANDRA OBERLÄNDER (Berlin/Bremen) presented a research project on the culture of work, focusing on the reactions of workers to labour laws of the late 1950s. In their reactions, workers more often than not revealed themselves as more radical than the Party itself in their demands for the persecution of idlers, thus showing, according to Oberländer, that a simple dichotomy between repressive authorities and submissive or subversive Soviet society might be not sufficiently complex to describe post-Stalinist society. In her commentary, BEATE FIESELER (Düsseldorf) stated that thaw was an offer made by political leadership to society and raised the question in how far and in which ways this offer was accepted by the latter.

The last panel focused on the relationship between the centre and the periphery, discussing differing reactions to de-Stalinisation policies in the western Soviet republics. The presentations showed that different strategies were developed to cope with the changing political directives and reformative initiatives coming from the centre. RAYK EINAX (Gießen) described how the political leaders of the BSSR, after a short period of irritation, coped with the new circumstances: by accurately implementing most directives from Moscow, they achieved goodwill and material rewards which made the BSSR a winner of Khrushchev's industrial and agrarian policies. On the other hand, NATALIJA KIBITA (Glasgow) presented an example of less successful adaptation: The strategies employed by the government of the Ukrainian SSR to strengthen their autonomy in economic policies did not succeed as they were not compatible with the decentralising framework of Sovnarkhoz- reform.

In discussing the changing role and shapes of Song Festivals in the Baltic Soviet Republics, KARSTEN BRÜGGEMANN (Tallinn) questioned whether the term de-Stalinization should be applied at all to the Baltic Soviet Republics, where Stalinization was never completed. He described how the Soviet authorities sought to monopolize the Song Festivals by reinterpreting their purpose and by introducing socialist and non-Baltic songs into their programme. At a second glance, this Sovietisation was not that successful: while the festivals became 'socialist in decoration', they remained rooted in traditions dating from the 19th century, which made them usable places for national reassurance and subtle protest against Soviet power. Commenting on the panel, JULIA OBERTREIS (Freiburg) emphasized the importance of taking into consideration the Republics and further exploring their role in the process of de-Stalinization as well as having a closer look at their diverse and complex inner development during this period.

In his concluding lecture, STEPHEN BITTNER (Sonoma) took up the question of continuities and discontinuities and the meaning of de-Stalinization for the further development of the Soviet Union. He argued the need to shift attention from the end of the Soviet Union to its afterlife: While one might consider the 1950s and 1960s as a period of Stalinism under repair or the beginning of the end, according to Bittner, it might be more fruitful to consider and explore them as the founding period of post-Soviet Russian society.

On the whole, the manifold perspectives on state and society during de-Stalinization which were presented at the conference showed a picture of a period of Soviet history marked by contingent and partly contradictory developments. While the discussions

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revealed much about relations between citizens and the state, which could reach from repression, through adaptation and negotiation, to the new need for Soviet authorities to consider the material needs of the population for the purpose of maintaining political legitimacy, the picture of society as a whole remained somewhat vague. All in all, one could get the impression that there was neither a dichotomy of state and society, nor a complete fusion between them, but rather a dynamic of shifting entanglements between different groups from above and below. This would have to be explored further in order to find out more about the shape of de-Stalinized Soviet society. Considering the results of the conference, this might be done most fruitfully by focusing even more on perspectives from below, on practices of everyday life, and on social interactions beyond the relationship between citizen and state, thus enlarging the perspective on Soviet society as it emerged during the 1950s and 1960s.

Conference Overview

Opening lecture

Chair: Thomas Bohn (Gießen)

Stefan Plaggenborg (Bochum): Post-Stalinism – An Epoch?

Panel 1: Society

Chair: Stephen Bittner (Sonoma)

Thomas Bohn (Gießen): „Closed Cities" versus „Open Society". De-Stalinisation and Urbani-sation

Galina Ivanova (Moscow): Десталинизация и социальная программа Хрущева

Melanie Ilic (Birmingham): Khrushchev and the Revival of the „Woman Question"

Juliane Fürst (Bristol): De-Stalinised Youth? An Exploration of a Paradox

Commentary: Dietmar Neutatz (Freiburg)

Panel 2: Communication

Chair: Melanie Ilic (Birmingham)

Stephan Merl (Bielefeld): Did basic principles of political communication change after the death of Stalin?

Jurij Aksjutin (Moscow): Эволюция общественных настроений в СССР в 50-е – 70-е годы по материалам массовых опросов очевидцев и свидетелей событий тех лет

Simon Huxtable (London): „The reader is not an icon": journalists and their aucience at *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 1956-1968

Commentary: Sergei Zhuravlev (Moscow)

Panel 3: Culture and memory

Chair: Stephan Merl (Bielefeld)

Polly Jones (London): Coming to terms with the past, or mastering the past? De-Stalinisation in comparative perspective

Maria Zezina (Moscow): Советские писатели и десталинизация в период «оттепели»

Alexandra Oberländer (Bremen/ re:work Humboldt Universität Berlin): Those who don't work shall not eat: A Cultural History of (non-)work in in Khrushchev's Times

Michel Abesser (Freiburg): A Cultural Playground for the Soviet Middle Class? – Soviet Jazz in the 1950s and 60s

Commentary: Beate Fieseler (Düsseldorf)

Panel 4: Space

Chair: Jurij Aksyutin (Moscow)

Karsten Brüggemann (Tallinn): „National in form, socialist in content"? Song Festivals in the Soviet Baltic Republics

Rayk Einax (Gießen): Much ado about Destalinisation. The BSSR 1953-1965

Natalija Kibita (Glasgow): De-Stalinising economic administration: Ukrainian alternative vision (1953-1965)

Commentary: Julia Obertreis (Freiburg)

Final session & discussion

Chair: Michel Abesser (Freiburg)/Rayk Einax (Gießen)

Steven Bittner (Sonoma): Was it really the Beginning of the End? De-Stalinisation and the Shadow of the Soviet Collapse

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