Challenges, Concepts, Ideas during the Cold War of the 1970s and 1980s


This conference on „Challenges, Concepts, Ideas during the Cold War of the 1970s & 1980s“ was sponsored by the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 923 „Threatened Orders – Societies under Stress“ at the University of Tübingen and aptly organized by Roman Krawielicki and Martin Deuerlein (Tübingen). As Ewald Frie (Tübingen) explained in his introduction, the interdisciplinary CRC examines riots, disasters, as well as dissolutions and competitions of social orders to discuss how such orders change, especially when they face threats to their very existence. Katharina Kucher and Georg Schild (both Tübingen) then presented the CRC’s project on the late Cold War, which places special emphasis on analyzing both the Western and Eastern side of the conflict and resulting dynamics from respective interactions.

As Roman Krawielicki and Martin Deuerlein (both Tübingen) outlined in their welcoming remarks, in case of the 1970s and 1980s this means to connect current research on those decades, as a time of transformation of international economic and social orders, to the analysis of the multifaceted conflict called „the Cold War“. In many respects, the year 1983 was a nexus for such developments: It marked the culmination of tensions that had piled up with the demise of superpower détente, but at the same time it was a turning point towards new contacts and ultimately a rapprochement between East and West. Its 30th anniversary therefore provided an appropriate opportunity to discuss wider developments of the late Cold War.

In the first panel, JOHN ROSENBERG (Providence) discussed the role of the hawkish „Committee on the Present Danger“ and its protagonist Eugene Rostow, its impact on the Reagan administration, and its short-circuited analyses dating back to the 1973 Yom Kippur War of why the United States had become a „handmaiden“ of OPEC and the Soviet Union during the years of détente. In contrast to this amalgam of political advocacy and anti-communist conspiracy theory, VICTOR MCFARLAND (New Haven) demonstrated how during the second half of the 1970s U.S. concerns over the Persian Gulf (crises in the Horn of Africa, Yemen, and then Afghanistan) were crucial for heightened superpower tension and the American arms build-up during the end of the Carter presidency. The latter launched the quest for American military superiority that Ronald Reagan then continued on an even larger scale. MARTIN ALBERS (Cambridge) introduced the parallel transformation and modernization processes of the People’s Republic of China beginning with the December 1978 third Central Committee plenum. Steered by soon undisputed leader Deng Xiaoping, it particularly intrigued Great Britain, West Germany, and France to take advantage of economic globalization without on the other hand jeopardizing respective relationships with the Soviet Union.

In the first keynote of the conference, VLADISLAV ZUBOK (London) explored causalities for the failure of détente and the Soviet collapse. He highlighted the role of „enlightened apparatchiks“ who suffered under the stale and confrontational policies of the old guard. Inspired by the rise of Gorbachev, they advocated a „new isolationism“ in terms of propagating Soviet disengagement from costly Third World adventures and of making efforts to deny the West the „Soviet fear factor“. A new détente process, „better“ than the one during the 1970s, would free the Soviet Union from economic burdens of the arms race and lead to trust between East and West. However, not only that their optimism of economic cooperation and prospective interdependence with the West turned out to be misguided, they were also unaware of the grave financial deficiencies of the Soviet Union. A „consumerist shock“, when Soviet citizens got a closer look of Western consump-
tion, furthered the reality shock of economic dependency on the West and of the futility of financial and other reforms within a socialist economy. Zubok viewed the grave systemic financial and economic deficiencies of the Soviet Union as a major cause of its collapse once political liberalization had removed aspects of previous political repression.

At the following conference day, ARVID SCHORS (Freiburg) presented as part of a larger dissertation project a detailed case study of the unproductive visit by U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to Moscow in March 1977, which represented a major and for President Carter deliberate break from cooperative U.S.-Soviet diplomacy during the Nixon and Ford years. The second conference keynote was delivered by MARK KRAMER (Cambridge, MA) who focused his remarks on developments in Eastern Europe between 1968 and 1981, that is from the Czechoslovak to the Polish crisis. According to the speaker, the smaller Polish crisis of 1970/71 to certain regards proceeded the larger one of ten years later. While on the side of the opposition many of the same leaders were involved in both protest manifestations, Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev refused in both cases to intervene and rather banked on „Polish solutions“. The Brezhnev doctrine of Soviet intervention rights were never revoked, though. It was just that all options of internal repression had to be exhausted first, with various Polish leaders in 1970/71, as well as in 1980/81, vacillating between quests for Soviet intervention or non-intervention – while Soviet-fueled power struggles were raging within the Polish communist party. Though in 1980/81 the situation was quite different from the early 1970s: The rise of Euro-communism, intra-European détente and West German Ostpolitik, and the 1975 Helsinki Accords had changed some equations. Kramer viewed the latter as not having an impact because they did not loosen Eastern European regimes, an assertion that was challenged as somewhat too short-term in perspective and oblivious of the ongoing Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) conference process.

At a panel on the role of experts STEVEN GRANT (Washington D.C.), a former United States Information Agency (USIA) official based in Moscow (1982-1985), reflected on his involvement with the first Western polling in the Soviet Union (1989) as a member of the USIA’s Office of Research. He frankly related his experiences with what he called „ideological blinders“ of certain U.S. policymakers and diplomats. TIMOTHY NUNAN (Oxford) presented on the basis of fascinating research in Russia, Afghanistan, and neighboring states the role of Soviet advisers in Southern Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989, and how they became mired between „Pashtunwali and Communism“ in tribal cross-border schemes and conflicts between Pakistan and Afghanistan raging long before the first Soviet „expert advisers“ arrived.

On the subject of transnational actors, the conference listened to comparative presentations by SABINE LOEWE-HANNATZSCH (Mannheim) and SONJA GROSSMANN (München / Tübingen). While the first presenter compared East (IPW and IIB) and West German (SWP and BIOst) foreign policy research institutes and their interactions, the second paper related insights on Soviet friendship societies in France, Great Britain, and West Germany. Though mostly concerned with the Soviet image in the West, and according attempts for repair after self-inflicted Soviet damage, those societies also served at times as important contact zones between East and West and communication channels with the Soviet Union.

A special panel on the 1983 war scare and the so-called ‘Able Archer’ crisis featured two fascinating studies in contrast about the historical relevance of these events. While NATE JONES (Washington D.C.) based on the still meager bulk of declassified U.S. records highlighted the then danger of an accidental nuclear war, MARK KRAMER (Cambridge, MA) challenged this assertion to be a mere myth. Focusing on available Soviet documentation and post-1991 interviews and memoirs by former Soviet officials and military leaders, Kramer noted conspicuous absences of a 1983 crisis throughout those sources. Still, there are way too many undisclosed or still classified sources untapped in both the United States and Russia to come up with definitive answers about the actual level of danger in 1983.
No doubt, stressful that year was indeed; it strained nerves of politicians, militaries, and millions of people worldwide at several junctures.

The following panel headlined „Decade of Fear – Decade of Trust?“ was a case in point through HENRY MAAR’s (Santa Barbara) paper on strengths and weaknesses of the American nuclear freeze movement during the first Reagan administration. Though it finally failed to win over majorities of Americans, and despite its skillful handling by an administration acutely aware of the freeze’s movement potential political clout, it had a lasting impact and helped to transform U.S. dialogues over nuclear weapons and so-called „limited war“.

The subsequent presentation by LAURA CONSIDINE (Aberystwyth) highlighted this impact through its focus on post-1985, another period of skillful handling by the Reagan administration when the U.S. president applied a very American trust concept to superpower relations and disarmament negotiations. Though it meant in essence that the United States can never trust the Soviet Union, the „trust but verify“ concept provided Reagan with a powerful tool of both persuasion and manipulation. A less skillful aspect of American foreign policy during the 1980s was presented by DAVID LEE (Philadelphia) who focused on the Miskitu Indians’ struggle for autonomy against the Nicaraguan Sandinista government. While during the Cold War U.S. administrations supported indigenous autonomy via the CIA in Nicaragua only, and just for strategic reasons, the Miskitus struggled to maintain their independence and got ignored once the American Cold War interest disappeared.

The final panel addressed terrorism discourses during the Cold War. For BERNHARD BLUMENAU (Geneva) there existed no „terror network“ during the Cold War that was systematically „masterminded“ by the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies. Rather, terrorist movements were both exploited and feared by intelligence services on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Though ideological affinity remained closer to the socialist states, it was anything but coincidence that at least the social-revolutionary brand of terrorism more or less disappeared with the denouement of the Cold War. ADRIAN HÄNNI (Zürich) then treated the audience to the „discursive construction of the ‘terrorist threat’“ during the Reagan period, highlighting several examples of the cultural „hyperreality“ exploited by the U.S. intelligence community and other agencies to pursue particular policies and secure institutional funding.

In his concluding statement, BERND SCHAFFER (Washington D.C.) attempted to widen the focus of the Cold War during the 1970s and 1980s to East Asia, in particular to Indochina with its almost two decades of „hot wars“ and China. The latter played an important global role when it engaged in a fierce, at times even bloody, split with the Soviet Union. China and Vietnam both challenged and inspired Moscow to indulge in Third World advancement and adventurism, thus making a major contribution towards reviving U.S.-Soviet confrontation from the late 1970s. Moscow perceived China as joining a strategic alliance with the West that faced the Soviet Union with threats of „encirclement“ and „dual fronts“.

The conference conveners need to be commended for assembling an international cast of junior and senior scholars to discuss the lively field of international Cold War research within a German university framework. Presentations and discussions at this conference demonstrated the vibrancy of the field. They showed how insights can be gained not only from new perspectives, but also by connecting different strands of research on the 1970s and 1980s – like the history of energy, movements, transnational history, terrorism, and others – to the study of the Cold War. Too often still, many comparatively well-funded universities and research institutes from the Federal Republic of Germany remain at the margins of international discourses on the Cold War.

Conference Overview:

Ewald Frie (Head of the Collaborative Research Center 923), Welcome

Katharina Kucher / Georg Schild (Heads of Project at the Collaborative Research Center 923), Welcome

Martin Deuerlein / Roman Krawielicki (Or-
ganizers of the Conference, Tübingen), Introduction

**Panel 1, The Shock of Globalization?**

John Rosenberg (Brown University), Reduced to ‘Handmaidens’ of OPEC and the Soviet Union: The October War, Oil, and the Origins of the Second Cold War, 1973–1983

Victor McFarland (Yale), Oil, the Persian Gulf, and the Second Cold War

Martin Albers (Cambridge), Western Europe and China’s Great Transformation

**Keynote I**

Vladislav Zubok (London), Detente’s Failure and Soviet Collapse: A Search for Historical Causality

**Panel 2, The 1970s: Decade of Uncertainty, Decade of Ideas?**

Arvid Schors (Freiburg), ‘Making Lions Lie Down with Lambs?’ The Resumption of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks after President Carter’s Accession to Office in the Spring of 1977

**Keynote II**

Mark Kramer (Harvard), Globalization and Eastern Europe

**Panel 3, The Role of Experts**

Steven Grant (Washington), The Soviet and East European Branch of the USIA Office of Research

Timothy Nunan (Oxford), From Pashtunwali to Communism? Soviet Advisors in Southern Afghanistan and the Soviet War in Afghanistan, c. 1979-1989

**Panel 4, Transnational Actors**

Sabine Loewe-Hannatzsch (Mannheim), Perception of the Other – East and West German Analysts in Mutual Perception, 1970–1989

Sonja Großmann (München / Tübingen), Unconditional Friendship? Soviet ‘Friendship Societies’ in Western Europe and the Challenges of the ‘Second Cold War’

**Panel 5, 1983**

Nathan Jones (Washington), The 1983 War Scare: ‘The Last Paroxysm’ of the Cold War

Mark Kramer (Harvard), The Able Archer 83 Non-Crisis: Did Soviet Leaders Really Fear an Imminent Nuclear Attack in 1983?

**Panel 6, The 1980s – Decade of Fear, Decade of Trust?**

Henry Maar (Santa Barbara), The Challenge of Peace: The Reagan Administration and Anti-Nuclear Activism in the 1980s

Laura Considine (Aberystwyth), Nuclear Arms Control and the Politics of Trust in the Reagan Administration

David Lee (Temple), Ethnicity and Revolution at the End of the Cold War: The Case of Nicaragua’s Miskitu Indians

**Panel 7, Terrorism – A Legacy of the Cold War?**

Bernhard Blumenau (Geneva), The Cold War and Terrorism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

Adrian Hänni (Zurich), Discoursive Construction of the ‘Terrorist Threat’ in the Reagan Era

Bernd Schäfer (Washington), Concluding Statement