

**Riots in Regions of Heavy Industry.  
Violence, Conflict and Protest in the 20th  
Century**

**Veranstalter:** Sonderforschungsbereich 923  
„Bedrohte Ordnungen“, Teilprojekt A03 „Riots  
in Regions of Heavy Industry“

**Datum, Ort:** 07.11.2014–08.11.2014, Tübingen

**Bericht von:** Katharina Schmitt, Centre  
Marc Bloch / Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

On 7/8 November 2014, during the longest nationwide railway strike in German history, a group of specialists in the history of industrial disputes and workers' protests convened in Tübingen to discuss „Riots in Regions of Heavy Industry“. Organized by Arne Hordt, Jörg Neuheiser and Sophie Stern (Tübingen), the international conference gave historians from a variety of European countries a forum to compare the unfolding of protests, conflicts and violence in mining regions as diverse as the Scottish coalfields, the Ruhr, Asturias and the Soviet Kuzbas during the 1920s and 1980s. Does a specific social order peculiar to regions of heavy industry exist through time and across different countries and political systems? How can we (re)conceptualize the relation between short-term dynamics, such as riots and rebellions, and long-term processes, such as changes in the structure of the economy? These questions raised by the organizers stimulated lively debate.

Following welcome addresses by EWALD FRIE and ANSELM DOERING-MANTEUFFEL (Tübingen), the first panel on „Meanings of Industrial Unrest in the Short 20th Century“ was opened by JÖRG NEUHEISER (Tübingen). In his introductory remarks, he stated that regions of heavy industry form a specific social order, which is characterized by constant change and social conflict. At times of national or international conflict and upheaval, however, breaks in ritualized forms of protest and the outbreak of wide-scale riots may pose a threat to the regional order. Starting from an analysis of the internal dynamics of mining regions, Neuheiser argued that research should explore the relation and interdependence between the local and regional as well as the national and international spheres. Focussing

on the Belgian Borinage-coalfield, NICOLAS VERSCHUEREN (Brussels) demonstrated that the collective identity of miners' communities did not simply vanish with the decline of coal and steel. Twenty years after the closure of pits in the late 1950s, „coal miners' daughters“ evoked the legendary miners' fighting spirit in their protest against multinational companies, which were producing textiles in the region in the late 1970s. The women tried to gain legitimacy as a new working class – to be taken seriously by employers and unions alike – through adopting traditional, masculine forms and symbols of protest. In contrast to the shared regional culture emphasized by Neuheiser and Verschueren, JULIA LANDAU's (Weimar) paper on the pre-War Stalinist economy in the Western Siberian Kuzbas region directed attention to hierarchy and disputes among the workforce. Due to the appalling living and working conditions and unequal access to scarce goods, foreign specialists, local and migrant workers and forced labourers found themselves in constant and potentially violent conflict. In the incipient Great Terror, the identification of „foreign agents“ as culprits of deadly accidents in the mines had consequences on the national level. In his comment, JOHANNES GROSSMANN (Tübingen) raised the question of agency: He argued that the dynamics of riots as a potential source of social change and the role of local actors should be emphasized with regard to the wide-ranging comparison between democratic and dictatorial systems and the spatial and temporal diversity in the case studies. In the ensuing discussion, Jim Phillips stressed the perception of heavy industry by workers, employers and governments alike as „basic industries“ with fundamental importance for societies. This notion proved momentous for workers' self-esteem and hence forms of protest as well as reactions by security forces. Competing interpretations of violence as erupting within or being inflicted upon communities – a narrative not least advanced by the actors themselves – were discussed controversially.

The second panel focussed on the „Mad times“ after World War I. SOPHIE STERN (Tübingen) dealt with the „Ruhrkampf“ as

a period of social unrest and economic distress. Whereas the revolution of November 1918 passed in a relatively ordered and peaceful manner, disorder, violence and – at times – civil war and foreign occupation determined everyday life in the Ruhr between 1919 and 1924. Analysing an attack on the town hall in Mülheim an der Ruhr by a crowd of several hundred unemployed on 18th April 1923, Stern demonstrated that revolutionary ideals and national demands alone cannot explain the outbreak and course of this riot. Local conditions and participants' diverse motivations have to be taken into account. WOJCIECH PIENIAZEK (Marburg) characterized the ethnically mixed Upper Silesian border region in 1918/19 as an „area of violence“. Due to the weakness of state power and the emergence of armed groups, robberies, looting and assaults on government representatives became rampant. Pieniazek argued that a „pacification by Freikorps“ was the only solution in this situation. Although the analysis of the inner structure of the Freikorps troops as „communities of violence“ proved fruitful, several discussants questioned whether restoring order through the use of machine guns and grenades was adequately described as „pacification“. In the final presentation of this session, MATTHEW KERRY (Sheffield) dealt with the revolutionary insurrection in the Spanish mining region of Asturias in October 1934. Kerry examined the specific local and regional conditions for the uprising as well as its relation to the broader European conflict between fascism and bolshevism. Fighting between revolutionary militias and government forces lasted for more than two weeks in the provincial capital of Oviedo and the port city of Gijón. Government forces dropped bombs on Oviedo, causing heavy damage in the city centre. Starting from the observation that such an aerial attack on rebellious miners would have been inconceivable in Great Britain during the general strike of 1926, HESTER BARRON (Sussex) drew attention to the different scale of physical violence committed by protesters as well as government forces in the three case studies. The availability of weapons and a possible brutalisation by the experience of World War I were debated controversially. Further ques-

tions raised by Barron concerned the leadership and coordination of protests, the relevance of regional identities and gender roles. A close examination of these upheavals – typically depicted as left-wing political uprisings closely connected to nationwide conflicts – would also reveal the relevance of the regions' economic structures: Apart from government buildings, privately owned pits and factories were major targets of rioting crowds.

A site of violent class struggle time and again during the 20th century, Asturias was the subject of the keynote lecture by RUBÉN VEGA (Oviedo). Vega analysed industrial decline in Asturias in the context of dictatorship and transition to democracy. Although state-owned companies were not profitable anymore, the region's strong and well organized working class at first succeeded in preventing massive layoffs. The 1980s and 1990s were characterized by several long-term and often violent strikes. Due to closures in the shipbuilding industry, inhabitants of Gijón had to live with demonstrations, barricades and street clashes for years. Social consciousness is currently determined by pessimism and nostalgia for a lost, prosperous past.

On the second day, proceedings focussed entirely on the 1970s and 1980s. GORAN MUSIC (Firenze) opened the third panel on „Places of Production?“ with a paper on the Slovenian industrial city of Maribor. Confronted with falling incomes and shortages of basic consumer goods, industrial workers – still imbued with their status as a vanguard of socialist modernity in Yugoslavia – marched to the city centre on June 20th and 21st 1988. The party leaders who came to Maribor were nearly lynched by the crowd because they refused to give in to the strikers' demands. Thus, the authorities' fear of another uprising led to passivity and contributed to the slow extinction of heavy industry in Maribor. Borrowing the term „moral economy“ from E. P. Thompson<sup>1</sup>, JIM PHILLIPS (Glasgow) analysed the breakdown of mutual industrial relations in the Scottish miners' strike of 1984/85. Taking a perspective from below, Phillips argued that by defending the es-

<sup>1</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*, Past and Present 50 (1971), S. 76-136.

established order – including employees' rights to joint industrial consultation and communal job security –, miners were reacting to the „external shock of Thatcherism“. Whereas deindustrialization from the 1950s to the 1970s was carefully managed in accordance with workers' concerns, this implicit agreement was threatened by the anti-trade union policies of the Thatcher government. Building on the observation that today more coal is produced than ever before – albeit in other regions than the traditional European coalfields –, JÖRG ARNOLD (Nottingham) questioned the inevitability of the decline of heavy industry and the ensuing massive layoff of manual workers. Was consensual downgrading and dismantlement, as it happened in the Ruhr, really the best miners could hope for? How does our perception of miners' protest in the 1980s change if it is not included in a narrative of inevitable decline and futile resistance?

The last panel addressed protests, riots and social change „after the post-war boom“. In a third presentation on Asturias, IRENE DIAZ (Oviedo) followed up on the keynote lecture and laid emphasis on the mobilization of whole communities, including merchants and priests, against the closure of pits. References to the region's revolutionary past – the insurrection of October 1934 and strikes against Franco's dictatorship – figured prominently in the campaigns of the 1980s. However, miners finally accepted „controlled dismantlement“ accompanied by measures to ease social tensions. In his comparative analysis of the 1984/85 miners' strike and the 1987 Rheinhausen protests, ARNE HORDT (Tübingen) challenged the traditional interpretation of these conflicts as mere epiphenomena of long-term economic developments. Analysing the Easington riot of August 1984, Hordt identified a break in established strike routines on the part of management and police as the major reason for the outbreak of violence. In contrast to the massive deployment of riot police in East England, protests in Rheinhausen were tolerated by Krupp managers and supported by local politicians. In both cases, however, resistance against the closure of pits and factories engendered new narratives of community and regional identity. PAULINA CODOGNI (Warsaw) explored the connec-

tion between strikes in the Polish steel industry in 1988 and the initiation of the 1989 roundtable discussions. Although strikers behaved in a peaceful manner, the security forces tried to disperse them with disinformation campaigns and brutal attacks by 'antiterrorist brigades'. Both party officials and opposition members became convinced of the necessity of negotiations: While the former feared strikes of the magnitude of the early 1980s, Solidarność leaders realized that mobilization on the same scale would be difficult to attain and therefore more might be gained through talks. Following up on Jörg Arnolds considerations, WENCKE METELING (Marburg/Cambridge) pleaded for the use of the term „industrial dismantlement“ instead of the impersonal „Strukturwandel“, as the latter would evoke change without naming the actors, who are taking economic and political decisions. Bearing in mind the earlier discussions about the 1920s, Meteling emphasized trade unions' varying roles as agents of change or conservation. The remembrance of resistance and its place in national, regional and local memory was discussed controversially. Jörg Neuheiser remarked that the limited remembrance of the Rheinhausen protests might be linked to the successful avoidance of open conflict – which came to a head in Thatcher's United Kingdom and contributed to the miners' strike prominence in national memory.

The comparison of regions of heavy industry across several European countries with different political systems proved fruitful and indicated some striking similarities between the „moral economies“ of capitalist and socialist countries on the one hand and the economic policies of leftist and rightist dictatorships on the other hand. The diachronic comparison between the revolutionary upheavals in the early 1920s and strikes and protests during the 1980s revealed major differences between insurrectional and defensive strikes: While workers demanded change and fought for a different future order after World War I – a democratic order with workers' participation in economic decisions –, they tried to defend the established industrial order and their communities' economic future in the 1980s. Gathering experts on diverse regions

---

was very successful in sparking debate and broadening the perspective from the conventional focus on Western Europe. Due to the different magnitude, frequency and duration of violence in the cases discussed, the appropriate unit of analysis remained controversial: Are we to compare regions of heavy industry or rather riots and their suppression in different contexts? Further research might explore the potential benefits of such a comparative approach and direct attention to transfers and entanglements between the regions discussed.

### **Conference Overview:**

#### *Welcome*

Ewald Frie / Anselm Doering-Manteuffel (Tübingen)

#### *Panel I. Meanings of Industrial Unrest in the Short 20th Century*

Chair and Comment: Johannes Großmann (Tübingen)

Jörg Neuheiser (Tübingen), Riots in Regions of Heavy Industry – Introduction

Nicolas Verschuere (Brussels), Where did the Miners' Strike Go? A Belgian Response

Julia Landau (Weimar), Accidents, Culprits and the Threat of War: Social Frictions in the Kuzbas (USSR) before WWII

#### *Panel II. „Mad Times“ – Riots in Regions of Heavy Industry after World War I*

Chair: Anselm Doering-Manteuffel (Tübingen)

Comment: Hester Barron (Sussex)

Sophie Stern (Tübingen), „Ordnungskosaken und Verbrechergesinde“ – Ruhrkampf between Revolutionary Ideals and National Demands 1920-23

Wojciech Pieniazek (Marburg), Pacification by Freikorps. The Riots in Upper Silesia, 1918/19

Matthew Kerry (Sheffield), „Vienna before Berlin“. Radicalism, the Local and the Imagined in the Asturian October of 1934

#### *Keynote Lecture*

Rubén Vega (Oviedo), Nothing Compares to the Past. Industrial Decline and Socio-Cultural Change in Asturias

#### *Panel III. Places of Production? Locating Heavy Industry in European Societies*

Session Chair: Natasha Vall (Middlesbrough)

Comment: Jörg Arnold (Nottingham)

Goran Music (Firenze), „The city stuck in grayness.“ Maribor's Industry in the Eyes of the Reform-Oriented Party and Intellectual Elites of 1980s Slovenia

Jim Phillips (Glasgow), The Moral Economy of the Scottish Coalfields and the 1984-85 Strike

#### *Panel IV. Protests, Riots and Social Change – beyond the Post-War Boom*

Chair and Comment: Wencke Meteling (Marburg/Cambridge)

Irene Diaz (Oviedo), Citizen Mobilization against Industrial Dismantlement in the Asturian Coalmining Areas (1970-1991)

Arne Hordt (Tübingen), „This is our pit!“ – Contested Meanings of Social Conflict in the Miners' Strike and Rheinhausen Protests

Paulina Codogni (Warsaw), The Polish Rubicon. Strikes in Upper Silesia and the Round Table Negotiations of 1989

#### *Concluding Discussion:*

Riots in Regions of Heavy Industry – Towards a Different „Pre-History of the Present?“

Chair: Jörg Neuheiser (Tübingen)

Tagungsbericht *Riots in Regions of Heavy Industry. Violence, Conflict and Protest in the 20th Century*. 07.11.2014–08.11.2014, Tübingen, in: H-Soz-Kult 18.02.2015.