

Tchernobyl – Impacts, Échos, Héritages Est-Ouest

Veranstalter: Melanie Arndt, Institut für Ost- und Südosteuropaforschung, Regensburg; Laurent Coumel / Marc Elie, CNRS-EHESS Paris

Datum, Ort: 16.03.2016, Paris

Bericht von: Thorsten Zachary, Institut für Osteuropäische Geschichte und Landeskunde, Universität Tübingen

It has been thirty years since the nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl in April 1986. A lot has been written about the disaster, yet profound scholarly interest is comparatively rare among historians. That is why Melanie Arndt refers to the Chernobyl disaster as the „known unknown.“¹ In order to cast light on the accident's history, MELANIE ARNDT (Regensburg), LAURENT COUMEL (Paris) and MARC ELIE (Paris), members of the DFG/ANR-project EcoGlobReg, organised the international conference „Tchernobyl – Impacts, Échos, Héritages Est-Ouest“ which took place in Paris on 16 March 2016. Scientists and researchers from France, Germany, Russia and Turkey came together to discuss ongoing research concerning Chernobyl's multiple social and political ramifications, transnational interrelations, and its impact in various countries. The conference aimed at bringing together knowledge from various fields of research, and working out prospective research topics, thusly emphasising the topicality and significance of Chernobyl to the present day.

KATRIN JORDAN's (Potsdam) study of different dynamics within the French and German media discourse emphasised how varying interpretations of the risks of nuclear power affected debates in different ways in each country respectively. According to Jordan, the public debate in France was greatly influenced by governmental experts of state-owned electric power companies who rated the disaster as an external and primarily technical problem. Discussions were consequently focused on technical aspects whereas the official experts rejected political arguments as illegitimate and irrelevant. In comparison to that, Jordan con-

tinued, the public debate in Germany was rather diverse. The debate was characterised by contributions from both government experts and non-state actors. This included, for example, many 'counter-experts' associated with NGOs. Hence Jordan considered the German mass media to have been a key factor in providing a forum for the counter-expert's professional knowledge, since it enabled them to challenge the 'official definition' of nuclear power's risks itself and to point to its political, economic and social implications. What all this amounts to, in Jordan's opinion, is that the different reactions regarding Chernobyl can be explained by different approaches to nuclear energy policy in the debates: in the case of France a rather technocratic one, in Germany a democratic one. The plenary discussion stressed the proactive role of spin doctors and consultants hired by the nuclear power lobby within the debate who tried to influence and even manipulate the debate which might offer another angle from which to study these debates.

In her presentation, TATIANA KASPERSKI (Paris) focused on the different Chernobyl narratives in Belarusian discourse and public memory. Immediately after the disaster the dominant public interpretation was closely connected to the official cover-up and downplaying by Soviet authorities, Kasperski's research ascertained. Soviet authorities began to enforce an optimistic narrative already in May 1986, Kasperski continued, when the state media framed the disaster as an external enemy against which the „Soviet family“ had to stand united and mobilise, and underlined the message with military rhetoric and imagery. However, despite the authorities' attempt to draw on the integrative power of the Great Patriotic War, Kasperski's research of archival material suggests that in fact the majority of people living in affected areas were well aware of the tremendous health risks and dangers of a nuclear accident. After 1991, when Belarus became independent, the official narrative still went back to the Second World War. However, the focus shifted towards a more abstract frame of Belarusian na-

¹ Cf. Melanie Arndt: Tschernobyl – die bekannte, unbekannte Katastrophe, in: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (2016), 12-13, pp. 3-10.

tional fate, resilience and renaissance. Also, Kasperski argued that the discourse gradually „individualised and depoliticised“ the accident, since it predefined its ramifications and focused them on the victim's modes of adaptation and coping with psychological problems, hence suggesting that the real problem was not so much long-term radioactive contamination, but rather the lack of people's ability or even desire to adapt to their environment. In Kasperski's opinion, this dominant public interpretation ultimately prohibits a real conversation about nuclear energy policy and its real cost.

AYŞECAN TERZIOĞLU (Istanbul) presented her study of the *Chernobyl effect* in Turkey. Terzioğlu demonstrated how in the course of the 1990s the effects of Chernobyl became a topical subject of public dialogue and revealed gaps among social, political, and medical discourse threads. Terzioğlu showed that after tests of Turkey's main export product tea revealed a one hundred times higher radioactive contamination compared to the norm, and a stark increase in cancer rates after 1986, the Chernobyl effect literally became an omnipresent „matter of life and death“ in society. However, as she continued, the gap between social and political actors widened, since Turkish authorities downplayed the ramifications to prevent feared trading losses. Terzioğlu showed, how the Turkish government tried to invoke a British conspiracy against Turkey designed to harm Great Britain's major competitor in the market for tea, consequently labelling criticism as unpatriotic and even un-masculine (metonymic with being weak). In addition, Terzioğlu found that the medical community struggled to attribute increased cancer rates to the nuclear fallout of Chernobyl, and tended to refer to multiple possible causes, especially obesity, chemical fertilisers and rapid urbanisation; so a real communication between social, political and medical actors was rendered almost impossible. Terzioğlu saw the turning point of the debate during the 2000s when the demands of NGOs and other non-governmental actors concerning the revaluation of Chernobyl gained momentum. To illustrate this she used the examples of rock singer Kazim Koyuncu and debates concern-

ing current plans of new nuclear power plants in Turkey, which all in all, for her, show how the catastrophe and the fear of its consequences are still relevant in public debates today.

In her presentation, NATALIA MANZUROVA (Ozersk) shared some of her poignant memories being one of the few female liquidators in Pripjat, less than two miles from the Chernobyl reactors, where she spent 4 1/2 years helping to clean the abandoned town. Right from the beginning of her service, Manzurova told, it felt like being in the „middle of a war zone fighting against an invisible enemy.“ With a detailed account of her duties during her service (measuring radiation, taking vegetation samples, etc.), Manzurova powerfully demonstrated the debilitating working conditions in the highly contaminated exclusion zone. However, she continued, not only was the work itself difficult but also were the billeting circumstances gruelling with ever-present sexual harassment, alcoholism, and violence. Manzurova's greatest concern, though, is that the role of women, especially their physical and psychological suffering during and after their service, is still hardly part of discussions concerning Chernobyl.

GALINA ACKERMAN (Caen) addressed ethnographic aspects concerning peasant cultures in the Polesian region which were directly affected by the Chernobyl fallout. When ethnographers started field studies in the Chernobyl region in 2004, Ackerman told, it was striking that within the rural regions mostly memorabilia were found left-behind. This is even more astonishing considering that these „beautiful artefacts“ were crucial objects for the self-understanding of this culture, Ackerman continued, since preserving and sacralising beauty was indeed meaningful for these peasants. In Ackerman's opinion, with the Chernobyl disaster and the coercive evacuation of residents from the area as a consequence thereof, the peasant's culture came to an abrupt end. The horrors that were associated with the Chernobyl catastrophe and with the territory which had housed the power plant were so immense that they eradicated any positive identification by the people with their former home. As for the

growing interest in such ethnographic aspects of Chernobyl, Ackerman argued that social quests of a national identity since the collapse of the Soviet Union foster this kind of research, since ethnographers and historians can proactively help to justify and establish separate national and cultural narratives. In the discussion it became clear that the forced relocation of peasants and the ensuing downfall or even destruction of culture was not something unique or singular but something recurrent throughout the history of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the discussion expanded the primarily peasant-related research questions and proposed to study the impacts of Chernobyl on Jewish culture in the region as well.

SEZİN TOPÇU (Paris) focused her presentation on the question of how to manage contaminated lands after Chernobyl and Fukushima. She demonstrated that experts agreed on the catastrophic consequences of nuclear accidents as early as the 1950s. However, they also agreed from the outset that optimal protection and compensation for people is technically unrealistic. Topçu showed how economic interest groups pressed for limitations of their liability since the 1950s, and how they succeeded in getting laws passed by both national and international legislative bodies shifting liabilities on taxpayers for the most part. Moreover, Topçu pointed out that the proposed management techniques, such as the zoning of contaminated lands, were not purely based on scientific facts either. She argued convincingly, that the case studies of Chernobyl's and Fukushima's zoning processes show that the process of building exclusion zones itself as well as the one of „reconquering“ contaminated lands were driven rather by social and economic interests than by scientific reasoning. In addition, Topçu referred to new conceptions of land and health as being both rivalling and intertwined as well as becoming more commonly-received since the 1980s. These constructivist conceptions come with a revalorisation of the biological body and its health. They consider both land and health to be rather an asset with financial value or cost which is why according to Topçu, individuals and their health can be exploited just like land. Topçu concluded that

the management of social psychology which disciplines feelings, perceptions and individual judgements became crucial for all actors in debates concerning ramifications of nuclear accidents in order to affect or control these debates.

Keynote speaker SORAYA BOUDIA (Paris) warned against the invisibility of the long-term effects of nuclear activities and concomitant low-dose radiation. However, for Boudia, Chernobyl is not the starting point of low-dose radiation poisoning, since atmospheric nuclear testing began already more than thirty years earlier, and in fact, scientists observed pathogenic effects (esp. cancer) of low-dose radiation already in the 1950s, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s.² Especially after the nuclear test ban treaty of 1963, scientists focused their research on low-dose radiation, and contributed immensely to the body of knowledge concerning nuclear radiation. Boudia pointed out that taking action against the effects of low-dose radiation proved to be difficult, since nuclear safety organisations, as for example the IAEA, are complex transnational institutions composed of multiple national actors and interest groups. Hence, joint action is difficult to achieve. In Boudia's opinion, the Chernobyl disaster is a forward-looking topic of research precisely because it shows how international organisations and national actors cope with nuclear catastrophes and how people start to adapt to „life in a toxic world.“ Within this frame of research, Boudia nevertheless called for a consequent integration of the Chernobyl disaster into a broader catastrophe context. Without this context, she feared, the socially constructed „invisibility of damages“ could be followed by a „collective amnesia“ when it comes to long-term catastrophes.

The conference proved to be an important forum for scholarly exchange which is all the more important, since the Chernobyl disaster and its ramifications are underrepresented in scholarly research. The conference channelled knowledge from not only historiographical approaches, but all branches

² Cf. above all Rachel Carson: *Silent Spring*. Boston 1962; John Gofman, Arthur R. Tamplin: *Poisoned Power, The Case Against Nuclear Power Plants Before and After Three Mile Island*. Emmaus (US-PA): 1971.

of research and worked out their interlacing and linkage to one another. In this respect, the workshop substantially contributed to the body of knowledge concerning environmental (nuclear) catastrophes and their significance for human co-existence. The presenters highlighted various perspectives on and approaches to the disaster: ambivalences in social and political/institutional discourse, public memory and commemoration dynamics, gender-related questions, and coping mechanisms of societies confronted with a contaminated environment. Lively discussions underlined that these topics have considerable potential and should be the focus of future research. Socially constructed mechanisms of coping with catastrophes and adapting to toxic environments proved to be promising research projects in particular. In summary, it can be said that the conference served to illustrate amply the topicality of Chernobyl today, despite its happening thirty years ago.

Conference Overview:

Introduction

Melanie Arndt (Regensburg) und Marc Elie (Paris)

Panel 1

Chair: Maurie-Claude Maurel (Paris)

Katrin Jordan (Potsdam): It Can Happen Here Tomorrow. The Debate on the Risks of Nuclear Power in West German and French Media after the Chernobyl Accident.

Tatiana Kasperski (Paris): The Half-Life of Chernobyl Public Memory in Belarus: from Heroic Battle to National Suffering to renaissance of Chernobyl Lands.

Panel 2

Chair: Laurent Coumel (Paris)

Ayşecan Terzioğlu (Istanbul): A very Long-lasting Panic and Fear: Chernobyl Effect in Turkey.

Natalia Manzurova (Ozersk): Women at War: Female „Liquidators“ of Nuclear Accidents.

Panel 3

Chair: Nadejda Koutepova (Ozersk)

Galina Ackermann (Caen): Mémoire des naufragés: paysans et ethnographes dans le

zones contaminées.

Sezin Topçu (Paris): Don't Worry, Be (W)Healthy! Management of Land Contaminated by Chernobyl and Fukushima Accidents.

Keynote

Chair: Klaus Gestwa (Tübingen)

Soraya Boudia (Paris): Research and Let Die: Risks of Low Doses Radiation Before and After Chernobyl.

Tagungsbericht *Tchernobyl – Impacts, Échos, Héritages Est-Ouest*. 16.03.2016, Paris, in: H-Soz-Kult 15.06.2016.