

## Human Rights after 1945 in the Socialist and Post-Socialist World

**Veranstalter:** German Historical Institute Warsaw; Exeter University's Research Project „1989 after 1989: Rethinking the Fall of State Socialism in Global Perspective“, funded by the Leverhulme Trust; Georg-August University of Göttingen; Conceptualization: Robert Brier (London School of Economics) / Hella Dietz (University of Göttingen) / James Mark (University of Exeter) / Ned Richardson-Little (University of Exeter)

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„Human rights“ have been a central object of historical research in the last couple of years, mainly with regard to their periodization and ‘breakthroughs’ on a global scale, as well as the appearance of new historical agents. Around the globe, the use of a particular „human rights language“ has become attractive for a large number of political and societal actors. The aim of the conference „Human Rights after 1945 in the Socialist and Post-Socialist World“, held at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw, was to highlight the role and historical agency of the socialist world in the history of human rights.

The introductory panel, led by the organizers of the conference, ROBERT BRIER (London School of Economics), HELLA DIETZ (University of Göttingen) and NED RICHARDSON-LITTLE (University of Exeter), focused on the intertwining of globalization, human rights and state socialism. From a social and cultural history perspective, it challenged existing narratives of the alleged caesural character of the year 1989.<sup>1</sup> Summing up dominant sociological theories about democratic transformations and the triumph of human rights since the 1970s, Hella Dietz explained why realist or modernization oriented narratives as well as the „World Culture“ approach miss important factors, e.g. the transnational interdependency, the possibility of endogenous change, the attractiveness of human rights, and changes of their

meaning over time. Ned Richardson-Little raised the important question about the actual meaning of „socialist human rights“. He located them both within the socialist history of ideas and the global human rights discourse, and argued for analyzing the socialist world as a dynamic actor on a global scale, instead of reducing it to a „passive victim“ of the West. Robert Brier underlined the importance of examining political dissent as a cultural practice. Looking at their function as an „anti-political Ersatz-Utopia“, Brier argued for focusing on the vernacular constructions of human rights. Drawing on Wolfgang Streeck's publication „Buying time“<sup>2</sup>, Hella Dietz proposed to rethink the history of 1989: instead of depicting it as either a success story that enabled democracy and capitalism or a tragic story of loss, she argued for embedding it into a global narrative interpreting the changes of 1989 as a reaction to global challenges that Western societies were also facing.

The first panel was dedicated to „defining human rights internationally“. Examining the particular role economic and social rights played in international politics after 1945, STEVEN JENSEN (Copenhagen) argued that the international human rights „project“ was shaped around the fault lines of race and religion in the 1950s. He showed how the character of the United Nations was reshaped by debates about education and non-discrimination in this era.<sup>3</sup> ALEXANDER OSIPOV (Flensburg) pointed out that the Soviet Union was a crucial player in this context – also with regards to European Minority Rights in the 1980s and after, e.g. at the 1990 Copenhagen conference of the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe). Reacting to violent domestic conflicts between ethnic minorities, the Soviet

<sup>1</sup> Robert Brier, *Historizing 1989. Transnational Culture and the Political Transformation of East-Central Europe*, in: *European Journal of Social Theory* 12, 3 (2009), pp. 337–357.; Hella Dietz, *Polnischer Protest: Zur pragmatistischen Fundierung von Theorien sozialen Wandels*, Frankfurt am Main 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Streeck, *Gekaufte Zeit: Die vertagte Krise des demokratischen Kapitalismus*, Berlin 2013; English translation: Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, New York 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Steven L. B. Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization and the Reconstruction of Global Values*, New York 2016.

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Union redefined the concept of the Soviet nation as one of „many peoples“. By highlighting ethnic minorities, it adopted an ethnicity-focused human rights language that was similar enough to Western rhetoric to provide a common ground for debate.

JENNIFER ALTEHENDER (London) opened the second panel of the conference dealing with state-socialist conceptions of „rights and human rights“. She presented the 1954 „National Constitution Discussion“ in communist China, highlighting the difference between „rights“ and „human rights“ by which official China wanted to create a distance to non-Communist Western countries. Ordinary citizens were encouraged to read and debate the constitution in mass reading campaigns. MICHAL KOPEČEK (Prague) presented his research about socialist conceptions of human rights, which he saw embedded in a concept of „rights and duties“, and its dissident critique. He underlined the importance of currents and counter-currents to historical tipping points like the Prague Spring in 1968 or the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE or the Helsinki Accords) in 1975. The intertwining between rights and duties within state socialist conceptions was also the topic of TODOR HRISTOV's (Sofia) talk on „Rights as a Resource in Workplace Conflicts in late Socialist Bulgaria“. In the Bulgarian constitution, human rights were considered to be „perfect rights“. This interpretation imposed obligations on the socialist government, which had to explain lacks in social rights by the „imperfections of socialism“ on the one hand as well as the imperfections of the productiveness of the Bulgarian citizens on the other.

The third panel on „Tolerance, Difference, and Rights“ under socialism, discussed the „Illusive Tolerance“ towards Buddhists and its unintended consequences in the Soviet Union (IVAN SABLIN, Heidelberg) as well as recent protests against language politics that marginalize Cantonese in contemporary China (ZHUOYI WEN, Hong Kong). During the fourth panel about „Human Rights as a Socialist Foreign Policy“, SEBASTIAN GEHRIG (Oxford) showed how the GDR sought to gain international recogni-

tion through UN human rights discourses – while presenting themselves on the side of post-colonial countries. From the 1960s onwards East Germany linked anti-Apartheid issues with human rights rhetoric and at the same time, just like the Federal Republic of Germany, opened up the issue of national sovereignty. Socialist Poland, on the other hand, needed a human rights language for its self-legitimization on the domestic level, as JENS BOYSEN (Warsaw) explained. Both papers highlighted the use of human rights in international politics for pragmatic reasons.

*Amnesty International* (AI) was the subject of CHRISTIE MIEDEMA's (Amsterdam) presentation opening the fifth panel on „Transnational Movements and Flows“. Examining AI's role in Polish state-socialism, she showed how the political circumstances of the Cold War influenced the NGO's work. Despite the human rights rhetoric of Poland's socialist regime, Polish AI-members were persecuted like any other dissidents by the authorities which did not accept their „apolitical“ human rights narrative. RÓSA MAGNÚSDÓTTIR (Aarhus) talked about inter-marriage between Soviet and United States citizens. Even if this concerned only a few hundred citizens, the Soviet Union did not allow its citizens married to US-Americans to emigrate – a fact that many contemporary observers could not understand because of the disastrous publicity it caused for the Soviet Union. In the United States, however, the „Divided Spouses Organization“ translated the „right to love“ into a human right. In his comment, discussant JAMES MARK (Exeter) questioned the teleological narrative of an inexorable human rights success after 1970. He stressed how both papers presented stories of failure – neither could Poles build up a functioning Amnesty Section in the 1980s, nor did human rights rhetoric help Americans to be reunified with their Soviet spouses.

The second day opened with a panel on „Dissent and Human Rights“ reflecting the historical situation in China, Ukraine and Yugoslavia during state socialism. SIMONE BELLEZA (Trento) spoke about the relationship between Ukrainian dissidents and the diaspora in the West during the 1970s, the importance of the Ukrainian *samizdat* (samvy-

dav), and possible continuities between those debates and recent developments. HERMANN AUBIÉ (Turku) analyzed discourses of Chinese (dissident) intellectuals. He identified three major factors that influenced these groups: first, the human rights abuses by the Chinese government, second, the reception of Eastern European dissidents such as Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń and Václav Havel, third, their reading of Western liberal thought. In contrast to Eastern European state socialist countries and their perception in the West, China had not been a top priority with regard to human rights politics before June 4th 1989, the day of the Tian'anmen massacre. Aubié spoke of a „June Fourth Effect“ in referring to the changed perception of Chinese human rights violations in the West.<sup>4</sup> ZSÓFIA LÓRANDT's (Florence) paper dealt with Yugoslav feminist dissent and activism for the elimination of violence against women. She linked this feminist activism with a broader Yugoslav human rights discourse in the 1970s and 1980s. In her paper, which was the only gender-focused contribution to the conference, she analyzed how Yugoslav feminists like Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović labeled male violence as „male racism“ and highlighted the innocence of the victims. However, feminist groups in socialist Yugoslavia were also divided, oscillating between interpreting women's rights as individual or collective rights.

The final discussion was introduced by comments from PAUL BETTS (Oxford), CELIA DONERT (Liverpool) and James Mark (Exeter) and opened up a general debate between the participants. After Paul Bett's diagnosis of a „fetish“ for breakthroughs, Donert advocated for a differentiation between human rights and humanitarianism. She also encouraged examining the continuities and discontinuities of a history of human rights beyond 1945, e.g. by taking into account the League of Nations or the British Commonwealth. Mark proposed a new narrative of a human rights focus on social rights during the 1960s being replaced by a liberal rights reading from the 1970s onwards.

The importance of analyzing vernacular human rights, i.e. analyzing when and how

people used human rights languages<sup>5</sup>, was one of the leitmotifs of the conference. The issue of teleology and normativity in historical human rights research was another major topic. Consequently, many papers presented stories of failures that contradict positivist narratives and challenge policy-orientated narratives of democratic transition. Parallel to transnational and international human rights history, the role of the state in human rights history was another key issue of the conference. Bringing the state back in, human rights can also be seen as an element of legal history – a promising approach embedding the highly normative notion of human rights in a wider legal history context. This conference brought together scholars working on various regions and actors in a truly fruitful manner. It linked different approaches and perspectives on the history of human rights in a way that contributed to an urgently needed, more complex understanding of the socialist world's role in human rights history.

#### Conference Overview:

##### *Welcoming address*

Ruth Leiserowitz (German Historical Institute Warsaw)

##### *Introductory Panel: State Socialism, Human Rights and Globalization: In Search of a New Narrative*

Hella Dietz (Georg-August University of Göttingen)

Ned Richardson-Little (University of Exeter)

Robert Brier (London School of Economics)

##### *Panel 1: Defining Human Rights Internationally*

Steven Jensen (Danish Institute for Human Rights): Defining the Social in the Global:

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<sup>4</sup> As Aubié himself pointed out, talking of „effects“ when referring to transnational dynamics has been quite popular in human rights historiography, see also: Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights and the Demise of Communism*, Princeton 2001; Robert Horvath, *The Solzhenitsyn Effect. East European Dissidents and the Demise of the Revolutionary Privilege*, in: *Human Rights Quarterly* 29,4 (2007), pp. 879–907.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Brier, *Beyond the Quest for a „Breakthrough“: Reflections on the Recent Historiography on Human Rights*, in: *Jahrbücher für Europäische Geschichte* 16 (2015), pp. 155–173.

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Social Rights, UN Diplomacy and the Emergence of International Non-Discrimination Norms and Politics, 1950-1960

Alexander Osipov (European Centre for Minority Issues): The Soviet Union's Involvement in the Establishment of the European Minority Rights Regime

Discussant: Arnd Bauerkämper (Free University Berlin)

*Panel 2: State-Socialist Conceptions of Rights and Human Rights*

Jennifer Altehenger (King's College London): Rights, Not Human Rights: Communist China's National Constitution Discussion, 1954

Michal Kopeček (Charles University and Institute for Contemporary History, Prague): Socialist Conceptions of Human Rights and its Dissident Critique

Todor Hristov (University of Sofia): Rights to Weapons: Human Rights as a Resource in Workplace Conflicts in Late Socialist Bulgaria

Discussant: Paul Betts (Oxford University)

*Panel 3: Tolerance, Difference, and Rights under Socialism*

Ivan Sablin (University of Heidelberg): Illusive Tolerance: Buddhism in the Late Soviet State

Zhuoyi Wen (Hong Kong Institute of Education): Contesting Cultural Rights in Post-socialist China

Discussant: Hella Dietz (University of Göttingen)

*Panel 4: Human Rights as Socialist Foreign Policy*

Sebastian Gehrig (Oxford University): The Fifth Column of the Third World? The East German Quest for International Recognition through UN Rights Discourses

Jens Boysen (German Historical Institute Warsaw): Polish Engagement in the United Nations as a Tool for Justifying Communist Rule in Poland and Gaining Leeway in the Warsaw Pact

Discussant: Robert Brier (London School of

Economics)

*Panel 5: Transnational Movements and Flows*

Christie Miedema (University of Amsterdam): Negotiating Space for International Human Rights Activism: Amnesty International in Eastern Europe before 1989

Rósa Magnúsdóttir (University of Aarhus): Soviet-American Intermarriage: Transnational Love and the Cold War

Discussant: James Mark (University of Exeter)

*Panel 6: Dissent and Human Rights*

Simone Bellezza (University of Eastern Piedmont, Trento): The Right to Be Different: Ukrainian Dissent and the Struggle Against a Global Consumerist Cultural Standardization

Hermann Aubié (University of Turku): Between Loyalty and Dissent: Revisiting the History of Human Rights in China Through the Discourse of Chinese Intellectuals and Dissidents

Zsófia Lórándt (European University Institute, Florence): Feminist Dissent, Activism for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and the Human Rights Discourse in Yugoslavia in the 1970s-1980s

Discussant: Celia Donert (University of Liverpool)

*Concluding Panel: The Place of State Socialist Societies in the Global History of Human Rights*

Paul Betts (Oxford University)

James Mark (University of Exeter)

Celia Donert (University of Liverpool)

Tagungsbericht *Human Rights after 1945 in the Socialist and Post-Socialist World*. 03.04.2016–05.04.2016, Warsaw, in: H-Soz-Kult 25.06.2016.