

New Approaches to the History of the Jews under Communism

Veranstalter: Kateřina Čapková / Kamil Kijek / Stephan Stach, Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences
Datum, Ort: 23.05.2017–25.05.2017, Prag
Bericht von: Ilana Miller, History, University of Chicago

How did communist policies and ideologies affect the everyday lives of Jews in East-Central Europe? The conference „New Approaches to the History of Jews under Communism,” generously funded by the European Association of Jewish Studies, research programme Global Conflicts and Local Interactions (Strategy AV21 of the Czech Academy of Sciences), the Czech Science Foundation, and the CEFRES in Prague, brought together scholars from the US and Canada, Israel, Russia, and across Europe to discuss new ways of considering Jewish life in the Soviet Union and other socialist bloc states. The conference organizers – Kateřina Čapková of the Institute of Contemporary History in Prague, Kamil Kijek of the University of Wrocław, and Stephan Stach, also of the Institute of Contemporary History – had several goals for the conference. The first was to investigate the experiences of Jewish communities neglected so far in scholarship (outside of the capitals or geographically isolated from larger communities). They also hoped to bring together scholars of both the Soviet Union and the other Socialist Republics for the purposes of investigating and comparing lived experiences of communism. Finally, the conference sought to compare new research methods of examining these populations.

The conference opened with a presentation by OLEG ZHIDKOV (Ben-Gurion University of Negev) on a new digital archive¹ of the Aliya movement from the Association ‘Remember and Save’. Among the goals of the digital archive, which relies heavily on oral history and testimonial, is to record evidence of Jewish religious life, Hebrew education, interactions with Soviet authorities, and contact with visitors from abroad. The presentation set the tone for much of the conference, which mirrored the ‘Remember and Save’ project’s

focus on the use of oral testimony, the importance of cross-border networks and contacts, and the continuation of Jewish social and religious life, as well as Jewish education.

These themes were evident in the first panel, „Jewish life, religious practice and Folklore under Soviet Communism,” which focused on ways in which Jews in the Soviet Union and Bessarabia coped with and adapted to the conditions of life among socialist regimes. The first presentation was from VALERY DYMSHITS (European University at St. Petersburg) on the role of religious practice and „illegal” Jewish activity (as it was widely referred to by his informants) among Soviet Jews. Relying primarily on a large number of interviews collected during his field trips, Dymshits showed how Jewish religious and social life became a central part of the Soviet shadow economy, as well as a central means of either reinforcing or providing an alternative arena to Soviet hierarchy. VICTORIA GERASIMOVA (Omsk State University) presented research on the Jewish community in Omsk. Using a combination of archival documents and interviews, Gerasimova showed that the Omsk community remained active throughout the Soviet community, operating variably within and outside of Soviet legal practices. While the synagogue and the community was focused on religious practices, the synagogue also proved a locus for Jewish social life. Finally, DIANA DUMITRU (Ion Creangă State University of Moldova) focused on how Soviet and Bessarabian Jews interacted with their neighbors from across the borders, and how migration and cross-border contacts impacted communities on either side of the Soviet-Bessarabian border. In particular, Dumitru showed how the migration of Soviet Jews into Bessarabia had a dramatic impact on the makeup of Bessarabian skilled professions, and thus perceptions of Jews in Bessarabia, as well as Jews’ understanding of their standard of living (as compared with Soviet neighbors).

In the second panel, „Literature and Jewish Identity,” scholars focused on the ways in which literature provides unique vantage into the Jewish relationship to the Soviet pro-

¹ http://www.soviet-jews-exodus.com/English/WhoWeAre_En.shtml (21.06.2017).

ject. DARIA VAKHRUSHOVA (University of Düsseldorf) presented on utopian ideals in Soviet Yiddish literature after the revolution, arguing that the Soviet Yiddish project allowed poets to combine Jewish tradition with Soviet reality. However, like other utopian literary models, the Soviet Yiddish project fell into dystopia in the late 1940s. MAGDALENA RUTA's (Jagellonian University, Kraków) work concentrated on the image of the Jewish communist in Yiddish literature, tracing shifts from before, during, and after WWII. Notably, Ruta argued that during the Thaw, Yiddish literature shifted dramatically from communist party interests to focus on Jewish themes (of nationhood and the Holocaust, for example). The final panelist, GENNADY ESTRAIKH (New York University) spoke on cultural diplomacy in Soviet Yiddish culture. Using evidence from cultural tours, publications abroad, and other moments of transnational contact, Estraiikh showed that after the 1950s, Soviet Yiddish culture was primarily marketed towards foreign audiences in the US and later in Israel.

In the third panel of the day, „Paths of Integration/Disintegration into the Communist Political System,” panelists focused on various ways of constructing Jewishness among different communities. GALINA ZELENINA (Russian State University of the Humanities, Moscow) used interviews, archival sources, and registration files to examine Jewish leisure activities, particularly how Jews used dacha culture as a space for Jewish education and community building. AGATA MAKSYMOWSKA's (University of Warsaw) research focused on the experience of being a resident of the Soviet Jewish settlement of Birobidzhan, highlighting the complex way in which Jews related to their identity as residents of the settlement—maintaining religious practice in private, while resisting obvious Jewish markers, such as speaking Yiddish and reluctance to admit to outsiders where they were from. KATEŘINA ČAPKOVÁ (Institute of Contemporary History, Prague) discussed the experiences of Jews in the Czechoslovak border regions, particularly the neglected story of Carpathian Jews who immigrated after the war from now Ukrainian lands into Czechoslovakia. Čapková proved that this popula-

tion challenges standard historical narratives about high rates of secularism and lack of religious practice in communist Czechoslovakia.

The final roundtable of the first day had the task of discussing the diversity of Jewish experiences under communism. Many of the speakers also attended to methodological challenges or approaches. ZVI GITELMAN (University of Michigan) focused his remarks on similarities and comparisons between the Soviet Union and the other satellite republics. JOANNA NALEWAJKO-KULIKOV (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw) spoke about the problem of language for Jewish life under communism, including a lack of readers and resources for Yiddish speakers, as well as the symbolic significance of Hebrew. Many presenters at the conference touched upon the issue of Hebrew in particular for Soviet refuseniks, who attempted to build resources for learning Hebrew. BOŽENA SZAYNOK (University of Wrocław) discussed postwar Jewish life in Poland, including the Polish government's relative approval of Jewish organizations in the early postwar years and drastic shifts in the government's attitude towards Jews in different time periods. ANDREA PETŐ (Central European University, Budapest) attended to the problems of methodological nationalism in the study of Hungarian Jewry, emphasizing how current politics still shapes the academic possibilities and limits of research.

On the second day, the fourth panel „Jewish Identities and Ways of Life under Communism,” examined how Jews defined and understood their own position under communism. ANNA SHTERNSHIS (University of Toronto) opened the panel with a presentation on how Soviet Jewish doctors understood the Doctors' Plot of 1953. Drawing upon a large body of oral interviews with Soviet Jews born before 1928, Shternshis showed that, while Jewish doctors often linked professional misfortunes (demotions or being fired) to the years around the Doctors' Plot, they rarely associated these misfortunes with government policies. Shternshis argued that they chose to associate their misfortunes with individual circumstances – the anti-Semitic beliefs of their superiors and colleagues— in order to emphasize that their ability to overcome the-

se challenges was a matter of personal triumph, rather than shifts in official policy. ANNA KOCH (University of Southampton) focused on the role that Jewishness played for Jewish communists' self-understanding in the early GDR. Koch showed how the Holocaust forced committed communists, who had previously felt their Jewishness irrelevant, to consider what being Jewish could and should mean for them in the newly formed GDR. KATA BOHUS (Jewish Museum, Frankfurt am Main), the final panelist, presented research on the activism of young Hungarian Jews in late communism. These young secular Jews, she showed attempted to fight an assimilationist paradigm and build a non-religious Jewish identity by pushing open discussion of certain issues relevant to the Jewish community, including the question Hungarian complicity in the Holocaust.

Panelists revisited the topic of „Jewish religious life and Folklore under Soviet Communism“ in the fifth panel of the conference. ELLA STINIGUȚĂ (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca) spoke about Mountain Jews and ritual life in Azerbaijan and Georgia, including the strategies developed to maintain religious tradition. In the absence of traditional worship structures, family and spiritual Judaism became especially important, as well as the sharing of religious resources with Muslim neighbors. MIKHAIL MITSEL (Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York) presented on Soviet policies towards Jewish religious communities in Ukraine, focusing on local negotiations and responses to directives established by the Soviet Council on Religious Affairs. Notably, Mitsel showed that Jews in Ukraine were active initiators of dialogue with the Council and communicating with support systems in Israel and the United States. KARĪNA BARKANE (University of Latvia) concluded the panel with new insights into Jewish religious life in Latvia after World War II. Barkane showed that the Latvian Jewish community was vibrant and unusually active, particularly in traditional religious service and synagogue life. Together, the three presentations aptly highlighted the wide-ranging possibilities of Jewish observance in the Soviet Union.

The final panel of the conference, „Jew-

ish Transnational Encounters,“ focused on the ways in which international social networks helped Jews in the communist bloc to build and maintain community both at home and across national borders. DAVID SHNEER (University of Colorado, Boulder) showed how relationships with socialist Jewish communities around the world enabled linked Jews in the GDR to a transnational network of Jewish life. Shneer demonstrated this by following cultural exchanges: the tours of the Yiddish singer Lin Yaldati, visits of Paul Robeson and Angela Davis to discuss anti-imperialism, cooperation between Yiddish theaters in East Germany and Romania, and international anti-Fascist Holocaust commemoration events. ELIYANA ADLER's (Pennsylvania State University) research focused on how Jews of eastern Poland and refugees from western Poland coped with Soviet Communism when they came under Soviet rule in 1939-40. These Polish Jewish Refugees, Adler showed, were supported by the „strange bedfellows“ of the Soviet Red Cross and the American Joint Distribution Committee, who helped Polish Jewish who found themselves in the Soviet Union with everything from basic resources to Manischewitz matza, bought by the JDC and distributed on the black market.

In the final roundtable and discussion, AUDREY KICHELEWSKI (Contemporary History Institute, Strasbourg University), ARKADI ZELTSER (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem) and Kamil Kijek summarized several of the main themes of the conference. The roundtable panelists identified a focus on the impact of migration, the use of oral history and testimonial, and a focus on interaction (between communities and across communities). In particular, conference participants emphasized Jewish voices and sources, moving away from older research models that relied exclusively on official government archives to understand Jewish life under communism. The conference gave participants and attendees the unique opportunity to share and learn from different approaches and stories of communities across the Communist states, as well as a space to discuss challenges of oral history, source access and the continued relevance of uncovering new Jewish perspectives on life

under Communism. It is to welcome the idea that the conference organizers plan a conference volume published by an American university publishing house.

Conference Overview:

Oleg Zhidkov (Jerusalem): The Jewish Movement in the USSR: New Sources and Perspectives (Video Testimonies)

Panel I Jewish Life, Religious Practise and Folklore under Soviet Communism I

Chair: Ilana Miller (Chicago / Prague)

Valery Dymshits (St Petersburg), The Boundaries of Illegal: Religious Practices and Shadow Economy in Soviet Jewish Life

Victoria Gerasimova (Omsk), The Jewish Community of Omsk under the Soviets, from 1940 to the 1960s: Between Tradition and Survival

Diana Dumitru (Chişinău), 'It is Better to Live in Romania Than in the Soviet Union': How Bessarabian Jews Tried and Frequently Failed to Become Soviet Citizens during Late Stalinism

Panel II Literature and Jewish Identity

Chair: Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow (Warsaw)

Daria Vakhrushova (Düsseldorf), The Utopia of Yiddish Literature after the Revolution

Magdalena Ruta (Krakow), Nusekh Poyln and the 'New Jewish Man': The Image of the Jewish Communist in Yiddish Literature of Post-war Poland

Gennady Estrakh (New York), Soviet Yiddish Cultural Diplomacy, from the 1950s to 1991

Panel III Paths of Integration/Disintegration into the Communist Political System and Society

Chair: Michal Kopeček (Prague)

Galina Zelenina (Moscow), 'Po Kurskoi, Kazanskoi zheleznoi doroge': Jewish Private Life in the Moscow Oblast between Leisure, Underground Religion, and National Revival

Agata Maksimowska (Warsaw), Being Jewish in Soviet Birobidzhan

Kateřina Čapková (Prague), Centre and Periphery: Jewish Experience in Communist

Czechoslovakia

Round table – The Diversity of Jewish Experiences under Communism

Chair: Marcos Silber (Haifa)

Zvi Gitelman (Ann Arbor)

Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow (Warsaw)

Bożena Szaynok (Wrocław)

Andrea Pető (Budapest)

Panel IV Jewish Identities and Ways of Life under Communism

Chair: Stephan Stach (Prague)

Anna Shternshis (Toronto), 'I was not like everyone else': Soviet Jewish Doctors Remember the Doctors' Plot of 1953

Anna Koch (Southampton), 'After Auschwitz you must take your origin seriously': Perceptions of Jewishness among Communists of Jewish Origin in the Emerging German Democratic Republic

Kata Bohus (Frankfurt am Main), The Opposition of the Opposition: New Jewish Identities in the Samizdat of Late Communist Hungary

Panel V Jewish Religious Life and Folklore under Soviet Communism II

Chair: Raphael Utz (Jena)

Ella Stiniguță (Cluj-Napoca), Mountain Jews and the Challenges of Ritual Life in the Soviet Caucasus

Mikhail Mitsel (New York), Jewish Religious Communities in Ukraine, 1945–81

Karīna Barkane (Riga), Beyond Assimilation: Jewish Religious Communities in the Latvian SSR

Panel VI Jewish Transnational Encounters

Chair: Katrin Steffen (Hamburg)

David Shneer (Boulder), East Germany's Jews, Their Transnational Networks, and East German Anti-Fascism

Eliyana R. Adler (State College/Warsaw), Strange Bedfellows: The Soviet Red Cross, Polish Jewish Refugees, and the American Joint Distribution Committee

Concluding Round Table

Chair: Kamil Kijek (Wrocław/Prague)

Audrey Kichelewski (Strasbourg)
Elissa Bemporad (New York)
Arkadi Zeltser (Jerusalem)

Tagungsbericht *New Approaches to the
History of the Jews under Communism*.
23.05.2017–25.05.2017, Prag, in: H-Soz-Kult
28.06.2017.