

Crossing the Iron Curtain. Tourism and Travelling in the Cold War

Veranstalter: Christian Noack, University of Amsterdam / Sune Bechmann Pedersen, University of Gothenburg

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The image of the Iron Curtain as an impenetrable obstacle to mobility between East and West during the cold war has long been criticized. However, studies of encounters between East and West and their importance in the cultural cold war has tended to concentrate on professionals such as the artists and scientists exchanged through cultural agreements. Yet millions of westerners went on holiday behind the Iron Curtain and a considerable number of easterners did the same in the west. In early April 2017 Christian Noack (University of Amsterdam) and Sune Bechmann Pedersen (University of Gothenburg) therefore organized an international workshop to query the mobility between the two camps motivated by the search for pleasure and recreation.

The first session titled „Twinning and Holidays in Germany“ saw three presentations. MICHELLE STANDLEY (Pratt Institute) presented a study of tourists of „capitalist countries“ on bus tours to East Berlin. Based on reports filed by the East German tourist guides, Standley found that many tourists had a negative impression of East Berlin and the sights they were shown there. However, these negative evaluations did not prompt the East German travel agents to alter the preparation and operation of the bus tours. In her presentation, JULIE ANDERSEN (University of Southern Denmark) showcased how the physical location of the border of the Eastern, Soviet controlled, zone of Germany and later the Wall dividing Berlin became a tourist attraction for Danish tourists going on holiday in West German in the early Cold War. In the final presentation of the session SAROLTA KLENJÁNSZKY (Center for Advance Study, Sofia) showed how Hungarian and Bulgarian

authorities, especially following the Helsinki agreement, used city twinning to increase incoming tourism from the Western European middle class. In her comments, discussant AMIEKE BOUMA (University of Amsterdam) called for greater emphasis on the personal experiences of both tourists and tour operators, a call that was repeated throughout the conference.

The second session titled „Youth and Pioneer Camps“ focused on youth tourism. ROBERT HORNSBY (University of Leeds) discussed how the Soviet youth communist party, Komsomol, at first used its travel agency Sputnik in an attempt to strengthen the relations with youth organizations in other Eastern Bloc countries, and how, having failed in this, turned to exploit tourism for earning hard currency and rewarding party members. KATHLEEN BEGER (University of Regensburg) presented a case study of the pioneer camp Artek on the Crimean Peninsula. She showed how the Soviet attempt to use the camp for promoting a positive image of socialist progress in the USSR collided with the perception of foreign visitors. The Soviet failure to understand the negative reactions of foreign visitors solidified the perception of the USSR as a fossilized and stereotyped society. In his comments, discussant CHRISTIAN NOACK (University of Amsterdam) repeated the call for increased focus on personal experiences through the use of interviews with various actors and also emphasized the need to consider how existing perceptions of foreign countries influenced the Soviet approach to engage with citizens of these countries.

The presentations of the third session, titled „Western Tourism in Eastern Europe“ turned the attention to Eastern European actors and their reaction to incoming Western tourism. ADELINA STEFAN (Central European University) showed how Romanian authorities were split between a wish to increase incoming Western tourism and a fear of possible informal contacts between Western tourists and national tourism industry professionals, and how the authorities failed in their attempt to control such contacts. In her presentation on incoming tourism to Bulgaria, ELITZA STANOEVA (European University Institute) discussed how Bulgarian tourism

authorities attempted to raise the number of Danish tourists by pegging travel sales to an overall policy of increasing and strengthening Bulgarian-Danish commercial relations. PAVEL MŮCKE (Czech Academy of Science) traced the history of Czechoslovak tourism and discussed how changes in the international East-West relations could negatively influence the level of incoming tourism. Discussant BRIAN SHAEV (Leiden University) in his comments focused on the similarities in the pattern of operations of the state in the three cases. Shaeve also noted that mass tourism was not an organically evolving phenomenon. On the contrary, it required huge logistical effort by the authorities and did not always produce the intended outcomes.

ANGELA ROMANO (European University Institute) delivered the conference's key note address. She focused on the porousness of the Iron Curtain and argued that, especially in the field of tourism, the Cold War created a window of interaction because westerners wanted to cross the ideological divide to see for themselves what life was like on the other side. Romano also emphasized tourism studies as one of many examples of how cold war studies have developed from a strict focus on super powers to broader focus on smaller states, institutional actors, and everyday life.

The second day of the conference opened with the fourth session headlined „The International Travel Industry“. The first speaker, IGOR TCHOUKARINE (University of Minnesota) discussed the often overlooked European Travel Commission and its work for trans-Atlantic promotion of European tourism, including travel to Yugoslavia. KIM FREDERICHSEN (University of Copenhagen) presented a case study of the travel agency of the Society for Cooperation between Denmark and Soviet Union. Frederichsen discussed the organizational structures and characteristics of the travellers as well as the negative influence of actual Soviet foreign policy actions on the public perception of the USSR. LENKA KRÁTKÁ (Czech Academy of Sciences) used the examples of seamen of the Czechoslovak merchant fleet, air stewardesses, and businessmen to show how various groups of Czechoslovak professionals embraced the opportunity to travel abroad

beyond the Iron Curtain. In his comments discussant CAMILO ERLICHMAN (University of Amsterdam) pointed to five areas that should be further developed when researching the tourist business across the Iron Curtain. They are (1) the clumsy capitalism by the East European travel agencies; (2) the moral economy of the relationship between state and citizens following the arrival of foreign tourists; (3) the cold war as a system of opportunities (regarding privileged market positions); (4) the role of the actors as cultural and social agents, and (5), whether the legacy of the cold war tourism industry in the post-1989 tourist landscape should be considered a failure or a success.

The fifth session was titled „In and Out of the Soviet Union“. LARA PICCARDO (University of Genoa) presented a detailed account of the Soviet football club Dinamo's 1945 tour of Great Britain and how difference in political culture and expectations influenced negatively on the tour, although the final results of two wins and two draws was considered a great propagandistic victory by the Soviet side. SHAUL KELNER (Vanderbilt University) discussed how American travellers used the opportunity of travelling to the USSR to meet with dissidents or religious minorities, and how the expectations and perceptions of each side both helped and hampered the value of the visits. LONNEKE GEERLINGS (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) traced the 1965 tour of the USSR of Rosey E. Pool and Ursel Isenburg and emphasized how their Western European identities influenced both their choices of destinations and their perceptions and conclusions of the travel experience, including the way they related to what they experienced upon their return. Commenting on the presentations, discussant CHRISTIE MIEDEMA (University of Amsterdam) called for the need for further considerations of the influence of predispositions and prejudices (on both sides of the Iron Curtain) on the actual personal meetings between Western and Eastern actors.

The sixth and final panel, titled „Travelling beyond the Eastern Bloc“ focused on travelling to places outside of the USSR of the Soviet communist dominated sphere. FRANCESCO ZAVATTI (Södertörn University) discussed

the tours of the Swedish-Albanian friendship association to Albania and how the pilgrimages were used both for confirming the beliefs of the travellers and for propaganda purposes. ANTONIO BARRENTO (University of Lisbon) discussed how the Red Chinese revolution of 1949 influenced the contents of the English language Chinese travel journal „The China Traveller“ from a source of information to a source of propaganda. ANNE HEDÉN (Södertörn University) argued that travellers to China used the travel experience to create a self-identity within the Swedish left-wing political environment by searching for a real revolutionary experience in a truly existing utopia. Discussant FRANK GERITS (University of Amsterdam) emphasized the need to spread the field of cold war tourism research still further, both beyond the Soviet sphere and to the relationship between tourism and consumerism during such travels.

In his concluding remarks on the conference, organizer CHRISTIAN NOACK (University of Amsterdam) emphasized that the cold war as a term or theme had been significantly expanded by cultural historians, introducing, among other, themes like tourism and travelling. This field was not yet fully developed, as an example he mentioned questions of social distinction and how they influence the choice of destinations. Several papers on the conference had shown that travelling across the Iron Curtain could almost develop into a life-style. Another interesting theme for future research could be focussing on the travellers' encounters – always prone to differing interpretations of visitor and visited. In the cold war setting, existing stereotypes of capitalism and socialism on both sides of the Iron Curtain may have led to particularly interesting misunderstandings and misconceptions.

Conference overview:

Opening remarks

Christian Noack (University of Amsterdam)
& Sune Bechmann Pedersen (University of Gothenburg)

Panel I: City Twinning and Holidays in Germany

Chair: Sune Bechmann Pedersen (University of Gothenburg)

Michelle Standley (Pratt Institute)

„Experiencing“ Communism, Bolstering Capitalism: Guided Bus Tours of 1970s East Berlin

Julie Andersen (University of Southern Denmark)

Summer Vacation in the Heart of the Cold War: Danish tourists in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the 1950s and 1960s

Sarolta Klenjanszky (Centre for Adv. Study, Sofia)

Touristic Relations between Eastern and Western Europe through the Lens of the City Twinning Movement (1960–1990)

Discussant: Amieke Bouma (University of Amsterdam)

Panel II: Youth and Pioneer Camps

Chair: Robin de Bruin (University of Amsterdam)

Robert Hornsby (University of Leeds)

Making Friends at Last: Soviet Youth Tourism to Communist Eastern Europe, 1958–68

Kathleen Beger (University of Regensburg)

Friendship at a Distance? East–West Encounters in the Soviet Pioneer Camp „Artek“

Discussant: Christian Noack (University of Amsterdam)

Panel III: Western Tourism in Eastern Europe

Chair: Ruud van Dijk (University of Amsterdam)

Adelina Stefan (Central European University)

The Lure of Capitalism: Foreign Tourists and the „Economy of Shadows“ in Socialist Romania of the 1960s–1980s

Elitza Stanoeva (European University Institute)

Welcoming the Scandinavian Tourist: Economic Opportunities and Ideological Challenges for Bulgarian Foreign Tourism in the Long 1970s

Pavel Mücke (Czech Academy of Science)

Short Insight to Czechoslovak Politics Towards Western Incoming Tourism to Czechoslovakia Between 1945 and 1989: Remarks about Actors, Trends and Historical Periodization

Discussant: Brian Shaev (Leiden University)

Keynote Address

Angela Romano (European University Institute)

A Much Porous Curtain

Panel IV: The International Travel Industry

Chair: John Paul Newman (Maynooth University)

Igor Tchoukarine (University of Minnesota)
Advertising, Regulating and Organizing
Global Tourism during the Cold War

Kim Frederichsen (University of Copenhagen)

Through Friendship to Knowledge: The
Travel Department of the Society for Cooperation
between Denmark and the Soviet Union

Lenka Krátká (Czech Academy of Science)
Business Trips as a Way How to Travel Behind
the Iron Curtain (Case Study from Czechoslovakia)

Discussant: Camilo Erlichman (University of Amsterdam)

Panel V: In and Out of the Soviet Union

Chair: Christian Noack (University of Amsterdam)

Lara Piccardo (University of Genoa)
Travelling for Playing: How the Soviet Football
Crossed the Iron Curtain

Shaul Kelner (Vanderbilt University)
Foreign Tourists, Domestic Encounters: Human
Rights Travel and Western Visits to Soviet
Jewish Homes

Lonneke Geerlings (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

„Much more freedom of thought than expected
there“: Dutch Cultural Mobilizer
Rosey E. Pool's Visits the Soviet Union (1965)

Discussant: Christie Miedema (University of Amsterdam)

Pavel VI: Travelling beyond the Eastern Bloc

Chair: Erik van Ree (University of Amsterdam)

Francesco Zavatti (Stockholm University)
Travelling Stalinist Utopia: Swedish Tourists
in Communist Albania

Antonio Barrento (University of Lisbon)
Going East: Socialist Destinations in the

China Traveler, 1949–1954

Anne Hedén (Södertörn University)
Elsa Larsson and the Story of her Trip to China
in 1977: The Fellow-Travelers Memories in a
Thirty Year Perspective

Discussant: Frank Gerits (University of Amsterdam)

Closing remarks

Christian Noack (University of Amsterdam)
& Sune Bechmann Pedersen (University of
Gothenburg)

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