

Transatlantic Summer School: A Century of Communism

Veranstalter: Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung (ZZF) Potsdam, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Freie Universität Berlin

Datum, Ort: 17.07.2017–21.07.2017, Potsdam

Bericht von: David Spreen, Department of History, University of Michigan

The centenary of the 1917 Revolutions proved to be an excellent occasion for the first transatlantic summer school co-organized by the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies at the FU Berlin, the Center for Contemporary History (ZZF) in Potsdam, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The week-long event paired established scholars of communism with graduate students and junior scholars from European and North American institutions to enter into a transatlantic dialogue over central problems in the histories of communism.

Most days began with morning sessions consisting of short presentations by senior faculty and public historians, followed by afternoon sessions for project presentations by graduate students and junior scholars. Monday's introductory discussion on „Communism as Alternative Modernity“ raised questions about the relationships between communism and democracy, as well as communism and violence. These questions were revisited throughout the week. How much of the „democratic deficit“ within twentieth-century state socialisms can be explained with reference to the nineteenth-century classics of Marxism? Could Stalinist „modernization“ have been possible without mass violence? But also: if we do accept the idea of Stalinism as a modernization strategy, to what extent is violence its distinguishing feature? What might this focus on mass violence in communism obscure about violence in capitalist societies? The first set of afternoon project presentations broadened the scope: presentations on the Frankfurt School and international politics, East German-French municipal partnerships and competing cultural diplomacies between East and West Germany turned the focus to the West and away from Marx, En-

gels, Lenin, and Stalin.

Violence continued to be a central question on Tuesday. In the morning, participants debated the limits imposed on discussions of violence by the politics of the Cold War, and the possibility of moving beyond those limits after 1989, particularly for a new generation of historians less burdened by the debates of the 1980s. The discussion further turned to the changing modes of violence throughout the „century of communism“ since 1917, and the reliance of non-violent dissidents on legal frameworks that allowed for certain forms of claim-making in East Germany. The afternoon session addressed topics spanning Nazi eugenics, the Holocaust and its importance for East German (but also West German and Italian) post-fascist education, the politicization of expellee discourses, and the post-1989 politics of providing access to the files of the East German secret police. This broad array of projects allowed for conversations about the diverse ways in which violence, both as practiced, experienced, remembered, and politicized played into the politics and culture of the Cold War.

Beginning on Wednesday, the conversation focused on cultural-historical approaches to the study of communism. The morning session focused on biography. Participants discussed the ways in which biographies can complicate our understandings of how individual decisions and trajectories determine political alignments and ideologies. Papers showed that biography can transcend nation frameworks by drawing attention to individuals who moved across national borders. Also discussed was the genre of (auto)biography and the particular challenges state socialism posed for its authors. These issues opened up new ways of thinking about the value of biographical sources and approaches for our understandings of national and transnational histories of socialism.

Thursday's morning discussion on everyday life and cultural history in the GDR raised questions with far-reaching implications. These included the still-prevailing tendency to understand 1989 as an endpoint to Cold War history, thus ignoring important questions about how experiences of East Germany continue to shape the post-1989 republic.

Another issue raised was the temporal proximity of contemporary historians to their subject matter. How do we mediate conversations between those of us who are approaching state socialist societies as outsiders and those whose scholarship speaks from the vantage point of lived experience? While the morning session focused on East Germany, the afternoon session expanded that conversation without abandoning the important questions of the morning: papers on housing projects and rituals in Yugoslavia, East German photography, images (and visions) of space travel in the Cold War, border crossings in Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia, and East German consumption before, during, and after 1989 drew out a vast variety of experiences of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe.

This expanded geographical scope carried into the Friday morning session on the legacies of socialism. How is socialism remembered in different parts of Europe? What is its status vis-a-vis other cultures of memory, in particular the Holocaust and Nazism? What kinds of memory culture competition exists, and what are their implications for contemporary Europe? But also, what are the lasting effects of revolution, Stalinism, and mass violence in different socialist and post-socialist societies? What role should witnesses play in official memory and museum culture? The final session brought together various transnational approaches with projects on Radio Free Europe, West German Maoists abroad, East German family law, guest workers, and Greek refugees in East Germany. At various times during the week one could have wished for a more global focus and more attention to non-European cases including those in which communism remains an ongoing project. Nevertheless, bringing so many diverse projects into conversation over the course of a week was certainly an ambitious undertaking and from the concluding reflections it is clear that it was a productive one as well.

Conference Overview:

Konrad Jarausch (UNC Chapel Hill) / Hanno Hochmuth (Potsdam): Begrüßung

Der Kommunismus im 20. Jahrhundert

Moderation: Hanno Hochmuth (Potsdam)

Chairs: Konrad H. Jarausch (UNC Chapel Hill) / Paul Nolte (FU Berlin)

Vorstellungsrunde, Impulsreferate und Diskussion programmatischer Texte zum Thema Projektpräsentationen durch die Teilnehmer/innen

Herrschaft und Gewalt im Kommunismus

Moderation: Scott Krause

Chairs: Uta-Ulrike Gerlant (Stiftung Lindenstraße, Potsdam) / Jens Gieseke (ZZF Potsdam), / Claudia Weber (Frankfurt am der Oder)

Projektpräsentationen durch die Teilnehmer/innen

Kommunismus in Biographien

Moderation: Stefanie Eisenhuth (ZZF Potsdam)

Chairs: Mario Keßler (ZZF Potsdam) / Susan Pennybacker (UNC Chapel Hill) / Martin Sabrow (ZZF Potsdam / HU Berlin)

Alltag im Staatssozialismus

Moderation: René Schlott / Stefanie Eisenhuth (ZZF Potsdam)

Chairs: Thomas Lindenberger (ZZF Potsdam) / Andreas Ludwig (ZZF Potsdam) / Arnd Bauerkämper (FU Berlin)

Projektpräsentationen durch die Teilnehmer/innen

Martin Sabrow (ZZF Potsdam): Öffentlicher Abendvortrag „Das Mandat der Gewissheit: Kommunismus als Avantgardeherrschaft“

Das Erbe des Kommunismus

Moderation: Hanno Hochmuth (ZZF Potsdam)

Chairs: Stefan Troebst (Leipzig) / Jan C. Behrends (ZZF Potsdam) / Irmgard Zündorf (ZZF Potsdam)

Projektpräsentationen durch die Teilnehmer/innen

Tagungsbericht *Transatlantic Summer School: A Century of Communism*. 17.07.2017–21.07.2017, Potsdam, in: H-Soz-Kult 10.10.2017.