

Emotions and the Disintegration of Communism in Europe, 1970-2010

Veranstalter: Jan Arend, Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies Munich; Franziska Davies, Department of History, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich
Datum, Ort: 03.11.2017–04.11.2017, München
Bericht von: Jan Bever, Historisches Seminar, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

More than 25 years after the disintegration of communism in Europe, historians claim these events as part of their researches. JAN AREND (Munich) and FRANZISKA DAVIES (Munich), the organisers of the „Emotions and the Disintegration of Communism in Europe“ workshop, aimed at developing new perspectives on the *longue durée* of 1989 by applying an approach of history of emotions to new historiography. Given the emotional turn in historical science approximately 15 years ago, the time has come to apply recently practised methodology to contemporary history. Historical scholarship has recently claimed the decades pre and post 1989, which provides not only a new field for historiography but also for history of emotions in particular.

The workshop emphasised the emotional experiences of the participants of 1989 as its main field of interest by adding an emotional perspective to the dominant political lens of viewing the fall of communism in Europe. The expression of nostalgia is a common phenomenon of today's post-socialist societies and raises the question of their history of emotions. The breakdown of the communist model gave birth to a state of uncertainty in many European countries. Other uncertainties, e.g. insecurity about how people were supposed to feel, rose among the population of once communist countries. Which ways of articulating one's emotions were appropriate?

Jan Arend and Franziska Davies emphasised in their introduction that history of emotions should not be understood too narrowly. They included the history of the human body (for example stress) and the history of subjectivities. The analysed period was set from the 1970s to the mid-1990s.

The first panel discussed the transformation of emotional regimes in the Soviet Union during Perestroika. COURTNEY DOUCETTE (Connecticut) analysed the emotional state of the people through reader's letters to Soviet newspaper editors. Doucette exemplified how change became visible in Soviet press and emphasised readers' letters as an important source, where people's emotions were articulated. Doucette discovered that readers often had emotional outbursts in letters regarding the current political situation, for example the conditions in local hospitals. Even though Gorbachev, like other leaders before him, had appealed to his citizens to stay professional during these years of change, many letter writers could not refrain themselves and even felt the need to excuse their outcry. Doucette uncovered numerous civilians who knew they were not following societal expectations on the expression of emotions in their letters. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Doucette captures an increase of cynicism in readers' letters, some of which also included notable anger such as death threats to political leaders. Doucette finds that these once suppressed, and newly expressed emotions contributed to the destabilisation of the Soviet Society.

Also using readers' letters as a main source, ALEKSEY TIKHOMIROV (Frankfurt am Main) focused specifically on stigmatized identities within the Soviet regime, whose emotional outcries in the past had been sanctioned by the regime. Tikhomirov therefore focused upon the so-called *Klyauzniki*. The Soviet public considered *Klyauzniki* to be pesky complainers, destabilising the regime with their criticism and „Unsoviet behaviour“. Once publicly denounced as *Klyauzniki*, these people often lost their jobs and social status in society. During Perestroika, formerly stigmatised *Klyauzniki* finally found letters to newspapers as a way to articulate their anger about witnessed human rights abuse. Letters in this particular case were used as a method of rehabilitating oneself and demanding empathy from the public.

The second panel referred the matter of „Emotions during the breakdown of communist regimes in Europe“ to the plenum. JAMES KRAPFL (Montreal) focused upon

emotion, sacrality, and narrativity in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic during the period of 1989-1992. Struck by the shout „on this holy emotion we must found the future of the ČSSR“, Krapfl described an emotional circle of the revolution between romance, irony and violence. Stemming from a widespread sense of frustration, November 1989 had an emotional ground for a quickly evolving community. Expressing emotions as a reaction to the violent clashes between riot police and protesting students in Prague on 17 November 1989 provided a means of communication and demonstrated disloyalty with those in power. Krapfl stressed a romantic notion of revolution by highlighting examples such as heart-shaped barbed wire sculptures being erected at the border to Austria and the sincere use of the word „love“ in politics. Emotions made the transcendence of rational choice possible and led to a sense of a moral community. Krapfl identified a new emotional regime during November 1989 but also tension between those who expressed their emotions and those who called on people to regulate their emotions.

VALERIJ GRETCHKO (Sapporo) highlighted the role of humour for the destabilisation of communist power in the Soviet Union. Although it is a challenge to contextualise humour due to its semiotic nature, it is worth considering, as Soviet authorities had an apparent fear to become an object of laughter from the very beginning of the establishment of the Soviet Union. Gretchko suggested a study of Soviet anecdotes, analysing folkloric and underground features. The problem with jokes, however, was mostly the question of identifying narrators and listeners as well as age and class of the recipients. Although authorities officially denied the existence of humorous anecdotes against the state, one third of the secret reports about the mood of the population dealt with anecdotes of this kind.

The 1960s to 1980s became a golden age of political jokes and during so, stand-up comedy increased in popularity. Comedians served as bridges between a polarised society and the regime by delivering light criticism. Nonetheless, due to strong censorship and fostering regime criticism, sketch texts were

not overly successful. Although humour did not lead to immediate actions, it did, however, foster disagreement. As Gretchko witnessed in the August 1991 putsch, humour constantly pushes imaginary boundaries and forms preconditions for real action or hostile neutrality.

The third panel, „Emotions Before and After Communism“, was opened by KONRAD SZIEDAT (Munich) who presented the case of a transnational emotional community before and after the downfall of communism. Sziedat's case study scrutinised the case of the West-German movement „Solidarität mit Solidarność“ as an example of an emotional community of people who had never seen each other. Publicly displayed solidarity gave rise to a transnational emotional community which was portrayed through fashion (wearing buttons), written contact (writing postcards to members of Solidarność) or music (listening to Solidarność). These manifestations of solidarity attracted both media attention and led to the financial support for the Polish trade union. Sziedat identified that activists of both movements later cooperated in the 1990s and took part in various new initiatives. He also listed cooperations between the West-German left and East-German dissidents, of which during the 1990s at least 36 members engaged in a new initiative to change the national anthem to Berthold Brecht's „Kinderhymne“.

Following this contribution, Jan Arend (Munich) introduced his project on a very particular emotion: stress. Using the example of the German Democratic Republic and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Arend presented the changes in the notion of stress. Although the term was originally connected to an unhealthy Western lifestyle of neoliberalism, it was soon to be understood as a central concept for modern societies. In his study, Arend focused on how psychological and physical health specialists dealt with stress and how it affected the time management of societies. He examined the questions of who describes themselves as stressed and who is described as stressed, and whether this is an act of legitimisation. The closer to the year 1989, stress was an increasingly central experience of people in the GDR and the ČSSR. This was not left unnoticed by the au-

thorities and sometimes led to counter-stress-actions as anti-stress rooms in factories.

KATHRIN ZÖLLER (Potsdam) presented her analysis of a long-term study, analysing the expectations and outlooks of pupils on their future in the East-German region of Saxony between 1987 and 1995. The study was initially conducted by the former *Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung* (ZiJ), Central Institute for Youth Research, of the GDR and included an open question part, allowing an unusual insight into the hearts and minds of East-German teenagers. Zöller thus analysed narratives in micro-history about political upheavals in these young people's perception. Zöller's quantitative findings on the emotional state of Saxony's youth between 1987 and 1995 highlighted a strong correlation of the terms future and fear, which was often connected to unemployment, neo-Nazism, increasing bureaucracy and drug use.

Although not all participants were fully familiar within the latest developments in the methodology of history of emotions, all participants included emotions as a topic in their historiography. Over the course of the conference the question „what people really felt“ was dismissed as a „non-question“ foremost by JAN PLAMPER (Berlin). Accepting the omnipresence of emotions enabled participants to understand that history of emotions is not about finding emotional moments in history but rather describing the expression of certain emotions during a distinctive period of time.

Nevertheless, the workshop highlighted a new perspective on the political upheavals during the *longue durée* of 1989. Findings of the conference, of particular note the holy emotions of the crowds in Czechoslovakia, solidarity between the blocks, fear of the future in Saxony, stress in the GDR and ČSSR, feelings of inadequacy of readers, malice and discontent in everyday anecdotes and vindictiveness of former *Klyauzniki* in the USSR, ought to be added to a new history of emotions of the fall of communism.

Conference Overview:

Introduction:

Jan Arend (Munich) and Franziska Davies

(Munich)

Panel 1: The Transformation of emotional regimes in the Soviet Union during Perestroika

Chair: Franziska Davies (Munich)

Courtney Doucette (Connecticut): The Emotional Regime of the Soviet Public Sphere

Aleksey Tikhomirov (Frankfurt am Main): Stigmatized Identities, the Quest for Dignity and Tearing Off the Mask during Perestroika

Commentator: Jan Plamper (Berlin)

Panel 2: Emotions and the breakdown of Communist regimes in Europe

Chair: Jan Arend (Munich)

James Krapfl (Montreal): On This Holy Emotion We Must Found the Future of the ČSSR: Emotion, Sacrality, and Narrativity in Revolutionary Czechoslovakia, 1989-92

Valerij Gretchko (Sapporo): Subversive Laughter: The Role of Political Humor in the Collapse of the USSR

Commentator: Walter Sperling (Bochum)

Panel 3: Emotions before and after communism

Chair: Franziska Davies (Munich)

Konrad Sziedat (Munich): Cross-bloc Emotional Communities: Western Solidarity with Eastern Dissidence, ca 1980-1994

Jan Arend (Munich): Stress in East-Central Europe, 1970-2000. How (post-) socialist societies dealt with tension and strain

Kathrin Zöller (Potsdam): Do I have to fear the future? Teenagers in Saxony, 1987-1995

Commentator: Joachim Häberlen (Warwick) and Malte Rolf (Bamberg)

Concluding discussion

Tagungsbericht *Emotions and the Disintegration of Communism in Europe, 1970-2010*. 03.11.2017–04.11.2017, München, in: H-Soz-Kult 04.04.2018.