

Nuclear Technopolitics in the Soviet Union and Beyond

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On March 22–23, the joint international research project NucTechPol held its first conference at the University of Tübingen, Germany. For two whole days, participants from such diverse fields as Eastern European history, history of international relations, and science and technology studies discussed the multifaceted role of the atom in Soviet, Russian and international technopolitics up to the present day. For their research design, the organizers Klaus Gestwa and Stefan Guth had three major goals in mind: 1) bridging the gap between Stalin's bomb and Chernobyl by opening up a long-term perspective on Soviet atomic energy, 2) framing technopolitics as an interdependent phenomenon involving a multitude of actors and affecting many aspects of modern life, and 3) encompassing the local and the global within a multilevel analysis. For the conference, they explicitly aimed at the ambiguity of the nuclear in high-modernist discourses as a force of both politics of disappearance and politics of display, hoping for „academic chain reactions“ that might create new insights and spark further collaboration.

MARA DROGAN (Loudonville NY) thus spoke of the complex entanglement of the major Cold War players in Third World technological development. Asian and Latin-American countries coveted nuclear energy as a source of energy independence and of national pride, but rebuffed US efforts to control their nuclear projects, leaving US officials to suspect communist interference and highlighting the limits of nuclear diplomacy. ELISABETH RÖHRLICH (Vienna) stressed that the Soviet perspective on proliferation significantly changed in the 1960s, leading up to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nu-

clear Weapons and the USSR joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group. At the time, military and civilian uses of nuclear energy were still closely linked to each other, and cooperation often evolved on a very personal level. FABIAN LÜSCHER (Bern) discussed the example of Mikhail D. Millionshchikov, the father of the Romashka nuclear reactor, which was created for outer space use in 1964. He became an important protagonist of nuclear diplomacy as he presented the Soviet Union's technological achievements on fairs and conferences around the world, always pushing the importance of disarmament while closely adhering to the official party line. Yet the true inner workings of nuclear diplomacy remain hard to grasp and ask for further research.

ROMAN KHANDOZHKO (Tübingen) retraced the development of the nuclear research complex at Dubna, which started out as a secret facility in the late 1940s but was opened to foreign visitors in 1955 to be presented as a new Soviet scientific-technological wonder and the official answer to CERN in Switzerland. CARLA KONTA (Trieste) described how the USA and the Soviet Union provided substantial assistance to the Yugoslav nuclear programme in the late 1950s and early 1960s despite Tito's aspirations for the bomb, as each side hoped to tip Yugoslavia and other non-aligned countries in their favour. IVAYLO HRISTOV (Plovdiv) hinted at the different political wings within the Bulgarian power structures that controlled nuclear decision-making. Soviet influence was strong during the whole time and techno-economic ties with Russia remained intact even after the USSR's collapse in 1991 due to the long nuclear partnership.

TATIANA KASPERSKI (Barcelona) showed how nuclear waste became a matter of increasing public concern in post-Soviet Russia. Only in 2011 did a much-needed law signal the administration's willingness to finally tackle the problem, but many aspects remain contested while others are defined in ways intended to conceal them from public sight. ANDREI STSIAPANAU (Vilnius) studied the carefully staged public hearings on nuclear waste issues in contemporary Russia as a form of simulating interest in nuclear problems and underlined the important roles

of community and territory in the respective critical discourses. In this matter, he added, it is still difficult to see „what the nuclear industry does not tell us.“

STEFAN GUTH (Tübingen) analysed how visions of technoscientific and socioeconomic progress were closely intertwined in the project of the atomic showcase city of Shevchenko (since 1991 Aktau) in Kazakhstan. As a hotspot of breeder reactor collaboration with France and the US, Shevchenko illustrates the international entanglement of the Soviet nuclear project in the 1970s, but at the same time the brute-force mobilisation strategies employed in its realisation also highlight the persistence of wartime and Stalin-era practices, including forced labour. NATALIA MELNIKOVA (Yekaterinburg) built on this Soviet experience to show the strange double-thinking of today's Russians about atomic energy that oscillates between a profound fear of its destructive powers and a strong economic interest in supposedly cheap, sustainable energy. PAUL JOSEPHSON (Waterville) took up this optimism of a nuclear renaissance to contrast it with the often times absurd and dangerous nuclear development plans of Putin's regime. The proposed „radiant future“ strongly reminded him of Stalinist promises and Soviet propaganda that in truth only served the economic interests of the ruling elite.

NESTOR HERRAN (Paris) showed how radiation monitoring in Western Europe developed from early attempts to track down atomic bomb tests, but quickly evolved into a tool for detecting civilian nuclear accidents, while LAURA SEMBRITZKI (Heidelberg) pointed at the unwillingness and initial incompetence of the Soviet atomic ministry in seriously dealing with radioactive contamination in the Southern Urals in the 1950s. Finally, GALINA ORLOVA (Moscow / Vilnius) referred to the „Socialism of Isotopes“ as a plethora of visionary implications for the Soviet Union's economy in the 1950s and 1960s which proved to be not only greatly exaggerated, but occasionally even harmful to the health and hearth of Soviet citizens.

In the course of the conference it became obvious that histories of women in the world of hard science and hard facts remain under-

studied, similar to the fate of non-Russian populations affected by nuclear testing and the role of forced labour in Soviet nuclear construction. The various forms of knowledge transfer and nuclear diplomacy often are impalpable. Comparative approaches are necessary to bring together the many voices of the atom, which opens up a broad field of interests with a strong tension between the hidden and the visible. In doing so, researchers also have to pay attention to artefacts, materialities and infrastructures in conflicting temporalities, and should be careful not to trivialize the dangers of nuclear power, as one is prone to highlight the exceptionalism of all things atomic. Nuclear history, as Klaus Gestwa concluded, possesses no half life: even though the end of nuclear modernity was proclaimed several times, it always recovered. The atomic age thus cannot be consigned to the past yet.

Conference Overview:

Introduction

Klaus Gestwa (Tübingen) / Stefan Guth (Tübingen)

Panel I: Three Worlds, One Atom?

Chair and Comment: Karena Kalmbach (Eindhoven)

Mara Drogan (Loudonville NY): Atoms for Peace and the Third World: Questioning the Cold War Framework

Elisabeth Röhrlich (Vienna): The Limits of the Dual Mandate: Soviet Positions in the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Nuclear Suppliers Group during the 1970s

Fabian Lüscher (Bern): Romashka and the Poetics of Soviet Nuclear Internationalism

Panel II: Atoms on Tour

Chair and Comment: Melanie Arndt (Regensburg)

Roman Khandozhko (Tübingen): Quantum Tunnelling through the Iron Curtain: The International Community of High Energy Physicists in the Soviet Nuclear City of Dubna

Carla Konta (Trieste): Yugoslav Nuclear Diplomacy Between the Soviet Union and the United States in the Early Cold War

Ivaylo Hristov (Plovdiv): The Soviet Technop-

olitical Influence in Eastern Europe. The Bulgarian Nuclear Power Program in the Shadow of the Soviet Union (1955–1989)

Panel III: Radiating Future: Nuclear Waste
Chair and Comment: Tanja Pentz (Heidelberg)

Tatiana Kasperski (Barcelona): Not quite a 'Green Lawn': Controversial Definitions of Nuclear Waste in Contemporary Russia

Andrei Stsiapanau (Vilnius): Nuclear Waste as Unclear Legacy. How to Classify and Manage Nuclear Energy Uses in Modern Russia?

Panel IV: Nuclear Technopolitics Past and Present

Chair and Comment: Julia Richers (Bern)

Stefan Guth (Tübingen): Breeding Progress or „To the Pioneers of the Distant Future Fly our 20th-Century Dreams!“

Natalia Melnikova (Ekaterinburg): Nuclear Industry in the USSR and Russia as a Point of Intersection between the State and Society, the Local and the International

Paul Josephson (Waterville): Putin's Indefatigable Atom: Rosatom Powers Russia into the Twenty-Second Century

Panel V: Half-Lives, Short and Long
Chair and Comment: Susanne Bauer (Oslo)

Nestor Herran (Paris): Beyond Fallout: The OEEC and the Early Coordination of Radiation Monitoring in Western Europe

Laura Sembritzki (Heidelberg): You Break it, You Buy it? Policies of Nuclear Disaster Relief in the Southern Urals

Galina Orlova (Moscow/Vilnius): The Short Life of Isotopes in the USSR, the 1950s and 1960s

Concluding Remarks and Final Discussion
Klaus Gestwa (Tübingen) / Stefan Guth (Tübingen)

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