The conference aimed to develop the scholarship on social policy and social conflict based on new scholarly research. It focused on the Soviet secret police and the justice system as well as social mobilization through party and state sponsored structures. The conference drew attention to patterns and relations of agency in a dictatorship and thus posed the major question of control over social relations and the establishment of social norms.

At the end of his keynote speech, DAVID SHEARER (Newark) proposed: “Perhaps in the final analysis we should abandon all these mentioned -isms, fire the keynote speaker and start all over again.” With his ironic remark, he referred to the theoretical-analytical framework of his keynote’s basic idea, which focused on the notion of „martial law/war/warfare or militarized socialism” to describe changing characteristics of socialism during Stalin’s Soviet Union in the 1930s and especially during World War II and how this change affected social control within the Soviet Union. Of course, no participant of the conference would have wanted to miss the thought-provoking keynote speech.

David Shearer stressed that all states, regardless of their ideological principles, exert some kind of social control over individuals and groups. But what distinguishes the system of Stalinism in this respect are three main points: First of all, the degree to which policies and institutions of public order became militarized under Stalin. Second, the degree to which state organs, especially the police, approach issues of social order. They do so by means of a „categorial imperative“, targeting segments or categories of the population instead of individual behavior. Third, the degree to which the state approached to social order, in fact exaggerated problems, which they should have resolved. Of course, Stalin’s war against peasantry and the chaos of the industrialization of the First Five-Year Plan created multiple social catastrophes (migration, forced displacement, famine etc.) which impacted the country for a whole decade. This can also be described as a major invasion of state power into the countryside. In that sense one can think about a collectivization of the Soviet agriculture as a project of colonization and of military occupation by a foreign power over a more or less hostile population.

In David Shearer’s view, the term „colonization“ is appropriate to describe Stalinist approaches to social order during the 1930s. Stalin himself declared in January of 1933 that the defeat of organized class enemies in the countryside did not end the threat to Soviet power but in fact made that threat worse by dispersing the state’s enemies into the cities and throughout the rest of the country. Stalin answered this threat by creating his own kind of martial law socialism.

In the post war years, the struggle for social order took two radically different and contradictory directions. The first trend was toward creating socialist legalism, taking police and issues of social control out of the hands of the security organs and returning them to the sphere of the civil police, courts and the social agencies. Second, this development from the security state to the civil state oddly created a greater degree of legal and judicial intrusion into the social and into the daily lives of Soviet citizens during the 1930s.

STEPHAN RINDLISBACHER (Frankfurt an der Oder) started the first conference panel on „Law, Policing and Social Practice, 1928-36“. He located his case study in the South Caucasus region in the borderlands to Azerbaijan, where Soviet officials defined the question of how to distribute the land between the sedentary Armenian and non-sedentary Turkish speaking communities as the so called „Pasture Issue“.

His research analyzes this ‘Pasture Issue’ beginning with the Soviet takeover in 1921 and the creation of a Transcaucasian Federation (SFSR) to consolidate the economic situation and Bolshevik control over the region. Rindlisbacher subsequently pointed to the long-term plans of soviet modernization and the question how they suddenly turned in a
violent anti-nomad campaign that triggered a policy that resulted in an ethnic cleansing.

MARIA STARUN’s PhD project (St. Petersburg) is devoted to the history of the Comrade’s Court, which was one of the public mechanisms for constructing workers’ solidarity in the field of discipline. The Comrade’s Court was introduced firstly in the time of the Civil War, then abolished in 1922 and was again reintroduced during the First Five-Year Plan where it was supposed to be a body which dealt with disciplinary violations at work. Maria Starun’s focus is not exclusively on disciplinary practices employed to carry out industrialization and political campaigns but also the visions of workers of their own rights and opportunities for legal protection. She intends to present the tension between disciplinary and legal fields in the context of economic law and its implementation as a production level.

AARON RETISH (Detroit) stressed the importance of civil cases when looking at social control in the Stalinist era. He examined alimonies from the 1926 family code through the implementation of the 1936 laws. Alimony was the main reason for peasants to appeal at the people’s courts. Retish first examined how litigants asserted their claims to entitlements, then how alimony was handled after collectivization, and finally the campaign for alimony after 1936, ending with a critique of men and women who were seen as exploiting or evading the welfare state. The progressive alimony policies of the Soviet state empowered peasant women to stake claims to entitlements as a right in court by employing their social group.

WILSON BELL (Kamloops) opened the second panel of the conference about “Penal (Dis)order and Terror, 1937-1941” with his talk about the Tomsk People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) investigative Prison as a site of social control. His paper explored issues of social control related to pre-trial/pre-sentencing detention. Bell told his story through the prism of the building’s history. He does not consider historic buildings as passive structures, but as historical actors with a story to tell. A comparative approach for pre-trial/pre-sentencing detention can be another perspective. The individual stories of victims who spent time in the building or, on the other hand, the stories of perpetrators who worked in the building can be focused in an actor-centered way.

IRYNA RAMANAVA (Vilnius) devotes her research to a campaign of show trials against agricultural managers, which the USSR launched in 1937-1939 in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Ramanava examined how these show trials radicalized themselves during the NKVD Operation 00447. Furthermore, she investigated the overall significance of these show trials in Belarus in the context of the waves of repression from 1937-38.

The third panel thematized the caesura of the (post-)war for social policing and social control (1940-1953). ALAN BARENBERG (Lubbock) opened the discussion with his current research project on soviet “hard labor” and population management in the post-war GULag. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Russian penal system was taken over by the Bolsheviks, who eventually transformed the tsarist katorga into the Gulag labor camps. Alan Barenberg focused on Soviet katorga labor as a very severe category of forced labor introduced by the Supreme Soviet in April 1943. One of his interpretive frameworks concerns the attempts to minimize reported mortality compared to actual mortality and how mortality changed greatly from World War I to Soviet forced labor. This research ultimately leads to a larger question about the manipulation of health statistics in the GULag.

FRANZISKA EXELER (Berlin / Cambridge) examined the connection between informal patronage networks, state rebuilding, and social control in post-Nazi occupation in 1944 Soviet Belarus. Her paper investigated how Soviet authorities returned to Belarus and were confronted with an utterly devastated place, a huge labor deficit and a large breakdown of the party-state apparatus at all levels. Exeler demonstrated the suspicious attitude of the Soviet authorities toward the region and their population. Their treatment of former partisans was rather ambivalent, at once embracing and distrusting them.

AMANDA WILLIAMS (Leeds) located her study in late Stalinism when the regime tried...
to get a tighter grip on virtually all corners of society. She presented an illegal abortion case from Tbilisi, Georgia, to examine how expert medical knowledge intersected with issues of social control and sexual morality in the Soviet Union. In 1936, the Soviet Union re-criminalized the abortion procedure and, effectively, many forms of contraception. Within a year, thousands of women went through illegal means to have the procedure, typically in far more dangerous conditions. Williams illustrated how her case exemplifies the tensions in the bureaucratic politics between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice. Women attempted to demonstrate their own agency and control of their reproductive capacities. They used their specific role as patients to navigate through the system to their own advantage.

The final panel of the conference addressed the echoes of Stalinism after 1953. IMMO REBITSCHEK (Jena) drew attention to the Soviet Union's institutional response to various categories of juvenile issues in the 1940s and early 1950s. World War II had literally and figuratively displaced an entire generation and transformed the streets into "spaces of social disorder". Rebitschek asked what we can learn about post-Stalinist social control over juvenile behavior with an institutional approach. By following the children from the streets, through different institutions, to the courts and labor camps, he manages in his research to shed light on different strategies and actors of social control formed by police organs (militia, MVD officials) and legal institutions (prosecutors and judiciary).

YORAM GORLIZKI'S (Jena) research aims to illuminate the problem of social order under Khrushchev – especially in the three years after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party and in a broader historical context of the Stalin era. Gorlizki investigates both critical currents in the intelligentsia, among students, and inner-party forces, and broader social processes, as well as particular images of social order from state functionaries. Gorlizki proposed a close examination of judicial and law enforcement agencies and debates within the legal community. Perceived breakdowns in public order may have manifested not only in the form of spontaneous demonstrations or riots, but also in an increase in violent crime or social aggression. One of the most important developments in the post-Stalin era was a reconfiguration of the concept of "social danger".

The roundtable discussion at the end focused on a few key points of the conference: David Shearer emphasized how the Stalinist system was operated, designed to exert coercion, to be an occupying power, and to exert control and conformity through external and arbitrary mechanisms, rather than through internalization of discipline. In doing so, he emphasized a clear distinction between external control and internalized discipline. The conference showed the importance of specific local conditions, practices, and perspectives and how they differ from region to region in understanding the Stalinist state and regime. Furthermore, Michel Foucault still exerted influence over ideas of discipline and social control in a more general sense. The ongoing absence of micro-studies, of people’s narratives and imaginaries of justice, injustice, discipline or control was also addressed. Future research surely will further delve into these topics.

Conference overview:

Joachim von Puttkamer and Immo Rebitschek: Welcome and Introduction

David Shearer (Newark): Keynote: Stalin’s Socialisms

Panel I: Law, Policing, and Social Practice, 1928-36

Stephan Rindlisbacher (Frankfurt an der Oder): The Formation of a Soviet Spatial Order: Solving the “Pasture Issue” between Armenia and Azerbaijan, 1921-1936

Maria Starun (St. Petersburg): A Market of Legal Bodies in a Stalinist Enterprise: Disciplinary Practices and Workers’ Rights

Aaron Retish (Detroit): Controlling the Soviet Family through Alimony: Loose Women, Starving Children, and Bad Fathers

Discussant: Alexandra Oberländer

Panel II: Penal (Dis)order and Terror, 1937-1941

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Wilson T. Bell (Kamloops): Investigating the Investigative Prison: Remand as Stalinist Social Control

Iryna Ramanava (Vilnius): Agricultural Managers: Seeking for Authority

Discussant: Aaron Retish

Panel III: Trust and Retribution: Social Policing (Post)War Times, 1941-1953

Alan Barenberg (Lubbock): Soviet Katorga Reconsidered: Retribution, Punishment, and Social Control in Wartime and the Post-war


Amanda Williams (Leeds): ‘They are afraid’: Medical Surveillance in Soviet Russia, 1940-54

Discussant: Tanja Penter

Panel IV: Echoes of Stalinism – Beyond 1953

Immo Rebtschek (Jena): From the Street to the Court (and Back) – Juvenile Delinquency in the Soviet 1950s

Yoram Gorlizki (Jena): After the XX Congress: Liberalization and the Problem of Social Order

Discussant: Michel Abeßer

Roundtable Discussion by Juliette Cadiot, David Shearer, Immo Rebtschek, Tatiana Borisova and Peter H. Solomon Jr.

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