

Pop-Up Culture: Popular and Mass Culture in late Soviet Society

Veranstalter: Center for Governance and Culture in Europe, University of St. Gallen; Dr. Julia Richers (Basel); Dr. Peter Collmer (Zürich); Carmen Scheide (St. Gallen); Ulrich Schmid (St. Gallen)

Datum, Ort: 24.01.2013–25.01.2013, St. Gallen

Bericht von: Ivo Mijnsen, Departement Geschichte, Universität Basel; Sergei Zhuk, Department of History, Ball State University

Interest in the history of late socialist societies and the Soviet Union in particular has steadily increased in recent years. Hegemonic labels such as Brezhnevian „stagnation“ (*zastoy*) are giving way to attempts at understanding complex societal dynamics: a drastic increase in the level of education, improvements in housing and the differentiation of social spaces coexisted with attempts to maintain political control and impose consensus from above. A growing number of historians use diverse methods to examine topics ranging from political discourse to cultural phenomena and the everyday life of Soviet citizens. The conference „Pop-Up Culture: Popular and Mass Culture in late Soviet Society“, organized by CARMEN SCHEIDE (St. Gallen), PETER COLLMER (Zürich), JULIA RICHERS (Basel) and ULRICH SCHMID (St. Gallen) is part of this strand of research. Its main interest lay in tracing the social, political and cultural impact that global popular culture had on Soviet society after the 1950s. As Carmen Scheide explained in her introduction, the goal of the conference was less to come up with a precise definition of popular culture than to track transfer processes and the emergence of a specifically Soviet form of popular culture.

The first panel dealt with various forms of popular culture in the Soviet Union. ZI-NAIDA VASILYEVA (Neuchâtel) analyzed grassroots initiatives in the late USSR, or so-called *samodeyatel'nost'*. Vasilyeva showed how the notion of „do it yourself“ signified individual initiative and amateurish creativity outside the framework of official culture. Still, she emphasized, it also constituted an attempt to enter into discussion with offi-

cial. KIRSTEN BÖNKER's (Bielefeld) comment lauded Vasilyeva for overcoming dichotomous notions of the relations between society and the state. The commentator and the ensuing discussion focused on the shifting borders that delineated what was permissible or not and the difficult line the Soviet regime walked between popular participation and ideological control.

Discussions about a specifically „Soviet“ culture also preoccupied the three remaining presenters: DANIJELA LUGARIĆ VUKAS (Zagreb) talked about the Soviet bards Vladimir Vysotsky and Bulat Okudzhava, BORIS BELGE (Tübingen) spoke about the composer Alfred Schnittke and EMANUEL LANDOLT (St. Gallen) investigated non-official art, specifically the Moscow conceptualists. Lugiarić Vukas and Belge discussed Soviet artists that enjoyed widespread popularity. Landolt's conceptualists, on the other hand, were a fragmented and marginal cultural phenomenon. All situated themselves vis-à-vis the official establishment, without necessarily considering themselves dissidents. Lugiarić Vukas emphasized Vysotsky's division between private and public spaces, with the proverbial „Soviet kitchen“ serving as a space of intimacy. Okudzhava, on the other hand, sang about nature travel, where hiking and camping signified freedom. Both spaces, underscored Lugiarić Vukas, served as alternatives to the „Soviet homeland“. AIMAR VENTSEL (Tartu) cautioned against accepting idealized notions of these spaces at face value. Several participants also questioned whether Vysotsky should be considered oppositional, given his star status as actor and musician.

Similar definitional problems arose with regard to Alfred Schnittke. Belge positioned Schnittke's work at the intersection of classical and entertainment music. He showed that the transgression of this distinction was politically risky since the Soviet leadership considered itself the heir of the European humanist tradition, in opposition to „decadent Western“ (primarily: American) culture. Belge maintained that Schnittke's music should be understood as a form of socialist realism. In her comment, ISABELLE DE KEGHEL (Berlin) encouraged international contextual-

ization. Could Schnittke's style be understood through the framework of hybridization, the individual, culturally adapted appropriation of Western influences? During the discussion, other commenters pointed out that the distinction between „high“ culture and „entertainment“ was problematic in the Soviet context, as the notion of giving the proletariat access to „culture“ had been part of official ideology since 1917.

In contrast, the conceptualists in Emmanuel Landolt's presentation had to organize their own reception, in private and often semi- or illegal spaces. Landolt framed the conceptualists as observers of Soviet culture, who used its various elements to put together a pop culture collage that described an alternative version of Soviet history. In the comment by TATJANA HOFMANN (Zürich) and in the ensuing discussion, the question concerning the extent to which conceptualists and other cultural figures could be considered representative for Soviet culture at large emerged repeatedly. The participants found no definite answer but agreed that profoundly researched case studies are needed.

After lunch, participants settled in for a lighter afternoon panel. Under the heading „transfers“, GLEB TSIPURSKY (Newark) presented his research on the *stilyagi* (approximate translation: „hipsters“), IRINA MUKHINA (Worcester) spoke about the port town of Novorossiysk, and Tatjana Hofmann analyzed novels about Crimea. A question shared by all presentations concerned images and imaginations of the Soviet Union. Tshipursky maintained that the *stilyagi*, a small but very visible subculture, dominated Soviet discourse in the 1950s. As official Soviet culture increasingly emphasized „socialist“ fun and leisure, the figure of the *stilyagi* came to mark the boundaries of the permissible, as characters with an exaggerated preference for Western lifestyle. Hence, they were censored and at times physically assaulted. Khrushchev's „Thaw“ was, in Tshipursky's view, more repressive than the bulk of scholarship assumes. KRISTIAN FEIGELSON (Paris) cautioned against overestimating the influence of the *stilyagi*. Some participants raised questions about the gender component of repressing „female-looking“ *stilyagi*

by having their hair cut off in public. Others compared the *stilyagi* to international counterparts like „teds“, „mods“ and hippies.

In her study of the port city of Novorossiysk, Irina Mukhina discussed the circulation of black-market Western goods in the Soviet province. This trade, she maintained, was not controlled by black-market traders (*fartsovshchiki*), reviled figures in public discourse but by elderly ladies (*babushki*) and sailors. In her interviews, Mukhina found that they did not consider themselves to be dissidents but rather saw the consumption of Western goods as part of the local economy and everyday life. JOSÉ ALANIZ's (Seattle) comment and the ensuing discussion tried to make sense of the gap between respondents' mentalities and the objectively illegal nature of their activities. While some pointed to problems of oral history, most concluded that what we today view as objective contradictions did not necessarily present themselves as such in late Soviet society.

In the last presentation of the day, Tatjana Hofmann analyzed novels by Vasily Aksenov (*The Island of Crimea*) and Lyudmila Ulitskaya (*Medea and her Children*). Both books conceptualize the Crimea as a multicultural, social paradise. Hofmann raised questions about using literature as a historical source able to establish a parallel discourse on „historical facts“ that nonetheless provides insights into the Soviet Union's cultural specificities. Commentator Emmanuel Landolt urged Hofmann to pay more attention to political aspects. Other discussants encouraged engagement with the books' reception and historical production.

Co-organizer Peter Collmer summed up his insights of the day aptly: The invasion of Western ideas and goods led to increased processes of negotiation between freedom and control, but their availability did not automatically signify Westernization. Finally, he said that music, cinema and literature were important vehicles with which to „look into people's minds“, without which an understanding of popular culture was impossible.

The second day of the conference was devoted to new media in the late Soviet Union and popular culture in the areas beyond the

metropolitan centers. The first panel began with a presentation by José Alaniz on the potential and limitations of Soviet comic books during perestroika. The commentator, ŽIVILĖ MIKAILIENĖ (Vilnius), praised the new material on the first Soviet comic books presented but, along with others, criticized that the „one pacifist“ in the presentation had nothing to do with the hippie movement in the USSR. Kirsten Bönker’s presentation focused on Soviet television viewers’ watching practices. She investigated viewers’ emotional bonds towards the Soviet regime and TV’s influence on the boundaries of private and public spheres. Interviewees’ narratives – often colored by nostalgia – revealed the communicative foundation of the regime’s stability. The commentator, Irina Mukhina, and many participants appreciated Bönker’s analysis but also encouraged more engagement with new literature on Soviet television.

After a coffee break, Kristian Feigelson presented his paper on television and popular mass culture in the USSR in the 1960s. He began with the invention of Soviet television in the 1930s and concentrated on how technology and cultural transfers affected its evolution. Feigelson argued that censorship on television was more difficult than in movies and that TV changed the Soviet Union’s political culture because it served both as an instrument for rule and as a medium for entertainment. Isabelle de Keghel added to the discussion on Soviet television in her presentation on the 1973 series *Seventeen moments of spring* about a Soviet spy during the Second World War. She pointed out the little known fact that the KGB monitored the production of this series. De Keghel analyzed parallels to James Bond and discussed how the mini series became an object of cultural fascination in Soviet and post-Soviet space. SERGEI I. ZHUK (Muncie) and other participants discussed to what extent the series served as a counterpoint to popular American Western movies and how it showed a different image of masculinity.

The last panel was devoted to pop-cultural developments beyond the Soviet centers. Aimar Ventsel spoke about Estonian *Estrada*-groups (bands that performed popular songs). He tried to demonstrate that since

the late 1970s Estonian popular music had become tremendously important for cultural consumption in the Soviet Union. By playing popular hits from the West, Estonian groups overtook their Russian-speaking counterparts in popularity. Gleb Tshipursky noted that the promotion of Estonian pop music by the Soviet organizers of entertainment was related to nationality policy in the USSR. It was also a consequence of Andropov’s anti-rock policy, which led to the replacement of Western groups with products from the „Soviet West“, such as Estonians. Sergei I. Zhuk also argued that the Estonian Estradas’ relatively short period of popularity was not due to original music but their imitation of Western hits in Estonian.

The second presenter, Živilė Mikailienė, discussed the hippie movement in Soviet Lithuania and the tensions between official and unofficial youth culture and state violence. This original presentation was based not only on oral history, but also on research in KGB document collections. The presenter follows a new trend in scholarship, aimed at studying the hippie phenomenon in various cultures. Many participants maintained that Soviet hippies were a relatively marginal phenomenon that manifested itself mostly in big industrial cities.

After the coffee break, the participants discussed the last presentation by Sergei I. Zhuk. He introduced his research on Western culture in provincial towns in Soviet Ukraine with a clip from the Soviet television show „Benefis Larisy Golubkinoy“, where a Soviet band covered the song „Mrs. Vandebilt“ by Paul McCartney. In her comment, Zinaida Vasilyeva suggested connecting the material on institutional détente in Soviet culture more convincingly to the reaction of Ukrainian provincial youth in the 1970s. Tshipursky challenged Zhuk’s emphasis on the 1970s as the beginning of mass westernization of Soviet youth. Zhuk countered with a figure: In 1977 alone Soviet authorities released 67 films from capitalist countries, compared to fewer than 20 during the entire Krushchev era. Carmen Scheide questioned some theoretical and methodological issues addressed in Zhuk’s paper, including his thesis about the existence of distinct Ukrainian Soviet youth cultures.

The conference ended in lively discussions about theoretical and methodological questions of pop/mass culture in the Soviet Union. After final remarks by Ulrich Schmid who praised efforts to shift research interest from the Soviet capital cities to the provinces, participants agreed that after Stalin, Soviet society developed features of modernity similar to other developed industrial countries of the world. What we now call westernization (or modernization) of Soviet popular culture was a result of international processes and the „opening“ of Soviet society to outside influences: The Thaw of 1950s, and especially the détente of the 1970s thus shaped not only the last decades of socialism but also post-Soviet developments in popular culture.

The conference proceedings of the participants' papers will be published in 2014.

Conference Overview:

Opening, introduction: Carmen Scheide (St. Gallen)

Panel 1: Negotiating culture

Chair: Carmen Scheide

Zinaida Vasilyeva (Neuchâtel): Samodeiatelnost: Formal framework for an informal initiative

Comment: Kirsten Bönker (Bielefeld)

Danijela Lugarić Vukas (Zagreb): Living vnye (on the example of avtorskaia pesnia of Bulat Okudzhava and Vladimir Vysotsky)

Comment: Aimar Ventsel (Tartu)

Boris Belge (Tübingen): „... und wenn es mir den Hals bricht.“ Alfred Schnittke, popular culture and serious music in late Soviet socialism (1968–1982)

Comment: Isabelle de Keghel (Berlin)

Emanuel Landolt (St. Gallen): Re-shaping popular culture in the Soviet unofficial artistic milieu

Comment: Tatjana Hofmann (Zürich)

Panel 2: Transfers

Chair: Peter Collmer (Zürich)

Gleb Tshipursky (Newark): Fighting Western Fashion in the Soviet Union: The Komsomol, Westernized Youth, and the Cultural Cold War in the Mid-1950s

Comment: Kristian Feigelson (Paris)

Irina Mukhina (Worcester): Cities of Culture, Towns of Change: Port Cities and Consumerism of the Late Soviet Era

Comment: José Alaniz (Seattle)

Tatjana Hofmann (Zürich): Everyday Culture in Vasiliy Aksenov's Ostrov Krym and Lyudmila Ulickaya's Medeya i ee deti. Poetic Features of Social Heterotopias

Comment: Emanuel Landolt (St. Gallen)

Panel 3: New Media

Chair: Julia Richers (Basel)

José Alaniz (Seattle): Hippies and Pacifism in Igor Kolgarev's 'Militariisk' Comics

Comment: Živilė Mikailienė (Vilnius)

Kirsten Bönker (Bielefeld): Watching Television and Political Communication in the Late Soviet Union

Comment: Irina Mukhina (Worcester)

Kristian Feigelson (Paris): Television and popular mass culture in the USSR (1960–1970)

Comment: Danijela Lugarić Vukas (Zagreb)

Isabelle de Keghel (Berlin): Seventeen moments of spring, a Soviet James Bond series? Official discourse, folklore, and Cold War culture in late socialism

Comment: Sergei I. Zhuk (Muncie)

Panel 4: Beyond the Centre

Chair: Ulrich Schmid (St. Gallen)

Aimar Ventsel (Tartu): Soviet West: Estonian estrada in Soviet Union

Comment: Boris Belge (Tübingen)

Živilė Mikailienė (Vilnius): The Hippie Movement in Soviet Lithuania: The tension between official and unofficial youth culture and state violence

Comment: Gleb Tshipursky (Newark)

Sergei I. Zhuk (Muncie): „Western Cultural Invasion“ or Détente in Provincial Towns of Soviet Ukraine: A View from Below

Comment: Zinaida Vasilyeva (Neuchâtel)

Conclusions, final remarks: Ulrich Schmid (St. Gallen)

Tagungsbericht *Pop-Up Culture: Popular and Mass Culture in late Soviet Society.*

24.01.2013–25.01.2013, St. Gallen, in: H-Soz-
Kult 19.03.2013.