

Environmental histories of the Visegrad countries: Cold War and the environmental sciences

Veranstalter: Institute of Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic; Centre of Russian, Central and East European Studies, University of Glasgow
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The workshop took place at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague. It was co-funded by the International Visegrad Fund and the Centre for Russian, Central and East European Studies (CRCEES), UK. The aim of the workshop was to explore the nature of East-West interaction with respect to the environmental sciences during the Cold War and, allied to this, establish and further an interdisciplinary network of scientists (from both Visegrad and non-Visegrad countries) focusing on the environmental history of the V4 region.

Writing in the introduction to a recent edited volume on Environmental Histories of the Cold War, the two editors noted that while „the study of Cold War science has blossomed over the past fifteen years... little has been written about the development and importance of the environmental sciences“¹. The Cold War period is characterised by multiple environmental histories with themes ranging from large-scale environmental interventions rooted in the application of, and unassailable belief in, advanced technologies to smaller-scale military-industrial initiatives, de-militarised zones, and even the activities of social movements. Importantly, many of the activities, events and environmental science agendas of this period continue to influence the shape of contemporary environmental issues and concerns. Furthermore, such activities were underpinned by an increasingly complex understanding of natural physical systems linked to developments in fields such as meteorology, oceanography and ecology; what might broadly be referred to as the environmental sciences. Nevertheless, be-

yond the large-scale environmental dramas of the Cold War period (nuclear power, chemical weapons, contributions of ‘big science’ in various fields etc.), relatively little is known about (i) the different ways in which natural physical systems were understood and conceptualised on both sides of the ideological divide and (ii) the manner in which such knowledge was communicated and debated across the East-West divide within different institutional and academic frameworks.

In recognition of this, the workshop’s broader scientific agenda aimed to critically explore the nature, character and culture(s) of East-West interaction with respect to the environmental sciences during the Cold War period. Initial questions of interest included: What is meant by the ‘environmental sciences’? How did related scientific agendas take shape on both sides of the ideological divide? Linked to this, in what way(s) did the Cold War context influence the development of the environmental sciences on both sides of the ideological divide? What was the nature and character of this context and what elements were of particular importance to subsequent developments in the environmental sciences? How important were large-scale international endeavours such as the International Geophysical Year (IGY) or the International Biological Programme (IBP) in facilitating such communication? Etc.

The workshop aimed to open up debate with respect to these issues and with a particular emphasis placed on the experience of the Visegrad countries, reflecting the limited nature of critical work in this area. The first day of the workshop included 11 papers, with day two devoted to discussion.

In the opening paper, ROBERT FRIEDMAN (Oslo), „Environmental Sciences during the Cold War: The need and opportunity for trans-national, multi-disciplinary collaborations“, provided a critical reflection on the ways in which a focussed environmental history could potentially open up new perspectives on the Cold War period and, more specifically, the connections between the

¹ John R. McNeill / Corinna R. Unger (eds.), *Environmental Histories of the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press & German Historical Institute, Washington D.C. 2010, p. 14.

ideas, practices, and differing socio-cultural contexts and constructions of the wider environment during this period. More specifically, Friedman's paper drew explicitly from the history of science literature in order to highlight the scope for examining in more detail the socio-cultural histories of the environmental sciences, which emerged strongly during the post-1945 period linked to such initiatives as the International Geophysical Year (IGY), International Biological Programme (IBP), as well as a range of national initiatives. Noting the relatively limited work in this area to date, he suggested that such an approach would facilitate an analysis of the ideas and practices underpinning the emergence and development of the environmental sciences within specific institutional and societal contexts. The Cold War period is understood as an era of marked development with respect to the various disciplines underpinning what are broadly considered the environmental sciences; for example, these included meteorology, oceanography, ecology, ecosystem science etc. Importantly, meaningful development in these areas took place on both sides of the ideological divide. Crucially, the emergent discourses concerning the structure and function of the physical environment had, and continue to have, a significant influence on policy as well as public understandings of the environment. While there is a need to acknowledge the different ways in which ideology and broader socio-cultural factors helped to shape the development of the environmental sciences in particular places, a rigid East-West distinction ignores the instances of knowledge exchange and movement during the period, in addition to the more specific international activities associated with initiatives such as the aforementioned IGY and IBP. With specific reference to the emergent discourses surrounding the fragility of the Arctic and associated issues of climate change, the paper also noted the importance of engaging with indigenous knowledge networks and the historical links between such knowledges and institutionalised scientific practices.

The second paper by JULIA LAJUS (Saint Petersburg) picked up on key aspects outlined in the introductory paper. More specifically, Lajus focussed on the history of cooperation

between Soviet and Scandinavian physical scientists in the Arctic region and the resulting flows of knowledge that took place during the inter-war period in spite of the prevailing ideological and political divisions. The narrative started in the decades before the onset of the Cold War thus reminding us of the long-term nature of scientific connections between East and West and the importance of remaining sensitive to pre-1945 patterns of intellectual exchange in order to understand more fully the resulting trends during the Cold War period. The paper was particularly useful in demonstrating the way in which a desire for greater understanding of large-scale environmental systems on both sides of the ideological divide encouraged communication beyond the confines of the nation state.

The third paper by JON OLDFIELD (Glasgow), „Conceptualisations of climate & climate change amongst Soviet geographers, 1945 - early 1960s,“ combined concerns evident in the first two papers. More specifically, it explored the way in which a specific discipline (geography) in a specific national context (Russia/Soviet Union) conceptualised climatic systems and the process of climate change, simultaneously underlining the way in which the resulting understanding drew from pre-revolutionary thinking as well as fed into contemporaneous political initiatives such as the Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature.

The second session turned to examine work in the Visegrad countries. LESZEK ZASZTOWT (Warsaw) provided in his paper entitled „The Impact of politics on the environmental sciences in Stalinist Poland“ an overview of existing work in this area in Poland and at the same time reflected on reasons why relatively limited critical work has been carried out in the area of environmental history. Reflecting on scientific trends during the early post-war period, Zasztozt noted the significant and largely negative impact of Soviet dominance for Polish science, resulting in the disintegration of links with the West and the general degradation of the scientific milieu. During the 1950s, Polish science was established largely along the lines of the Soviet Academy of Sciences model and a greater emphasis was placed on technical and applied

areas of science. At the same time, Zasztowt also noted the scope for different national approaches to certain scientific issues in spite of the strong influence from Moscow. The paper also drew attention to the influence of the Soviet Union's policies on Polish natural resources and the wider environment via an emphasis on heavy industry and construction projects.

The papers by MARIA PALASIK (Budapest) and ZSUZSANNA BORVENDÉG (Budapest) highlighted a specific socio-environmental issue related to the socialist period in Hungary; namely, the development of new industrial towns and the resulting consequences for the wider environment. Palasik's paper provided a detailed examination of the multiple ways in which such activities played out at the local level with the resulting degradation of environmental resources. Borvendég's paper provided a similarly in-depth examination of the history of a model socialist city in Hungary, [Tatabanya]. Once again, the negative environmental consequences were highlighted as well as broader social/health concerns. Borvendég followed the study through to the contemporary period in order to reflect on the way in which the town has attempted, more or less successfully, to redefine itself in the post-1989 period. The paper by LUDOVÍT HALLON (Bratislava), focused on the problems related to post-war industrialisation in Slovakia and showed how the necessity to develop industry influenced setting up the agenda of priority research in science and technology. He combined a classical chronological approach with a brief analysis of socio-economic reasons and consequences.

The third session turned to examine available sources and archives linked to environmental history in the V4 countries and beyond. It also reflected on some existing research agendas dealing with the Cold War period. Together these papers drew attention to (i) the evident wealth of archival data that exists to help further our understanding of the influence of Soviet Russia on the development of what can broadly be described as the environmental sciences in the Visegrad region - JAN SZUMSKI (Warszawa), "The Soviet Impact (Communist Party of

the Soviet Union) on Environmental Sciences in Poland (based on disclosure documents from Russian archives)"; (ii) the need for more work devoted to examining the consequences of the Visegrad region's socialist interlude for contemporary approaches towards understandings of the environment - JANA DLOUHÁ (Prague), "Projects at the Charles University Environment Center"; and (iii) the importance of conceptualising the Cold War period as a dynamic (interacting and interactive) intellectual context - EMMA HAKALA (Helsinki), "Environment in the Cold War interaction framework". Hakala's paper was grounded on the results of a previous project, "Knowledge through the Iron Curtain", which aimed to identify the various links that existed between East and West in the environmental field during the Cold War and to find out how they were formed and maintained. Finally, SILKE FENGLER's (Vienna) paper "Environmental sciences in Austria" provided a review of the current approach to environmental history in Austria, highlighting the potential for more critical work in this area. More generally, Fengler's paper drew attention to Austria's role as a point of exchange between East and West during the Cold War period.

The workshop provided a clear indication of the considerable potential for further work related to critical environmental histories of the Visegrad region linked to ongoing research in other former socialist regions. It is intended that future initiatives will both develop and strengthen the network of academics interested in these themes.

Conference Overview:

Session Theme: Environmental histories of the Cold War

Robert Marc Friedman (Oslo): "Environmental Sciences during the Cold War": The need and opportunity for trans-national, multi-disciplinary collaborations

Julia Lajus (Saint Petersburg): Circulation of knowledge between the Soviet and Scandinavian scientists about warming of the Arctic, 1920s- 1950s

Jonathan Oldfield (Glasgow): Conceptualisations of climate & climate change amongst So-

viet geographers, 1945 - early 1960

Session Theme: Environmental histories of the Cold War – the Visegrad countries

Leszek Zasztowt (Warsaw): The Impact of politics on the environmental sciences in Stalinist Poland (some general remarks)

Maria Palasik (Budapest): The new industrial towns and environment in Hungary in the 50s

Zsuzsanna Borvendég (Budapest): A former socialist model city Tatabánya on the edge of environmental disaster

Ludovít Hallon (Bratislava): Environmental issues the socialist industrialisation in Slovakia in the 1950's

Session Theme: V4 Sources, archives, running projects

Jan Szumski (Warsaw): The Soviet Impact (Communist Party of the Soviet Union - CPSU) on Environmental Sciences in Poland (based on disclosure documents from Russian archives)

Emma Hakala (Helsinki): Environment in the Cold War interaction framework

Jana Dlouhá (Prague): Projects at the Charles University Environment Center

Silke Fengler (Vienna): Environmental sciences in Austria

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