

Einleitung

Fear and Fascination: War, Enemies, and the Other in the Soviet Bloc through the 1950s

by
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The essays that follow break important new ground in the historiography of East Central Europe.¹ More than two decades after the opening of state and party archives, the work produced on this region still tends to focus on single country histories, with little sense of the movement of ideas and people across national boundaries, let alone to or from areas outside the Soviet Bloc.² David Tompkins, Malgorzata Fidelis, and Melissa Feinberg focus on the workings of foreign worlds inside the Soviet Bloc, and provide first glimpses of processes and developments of which we have to date known little if anything. The subjects range from the presence of China in Poland and East Germany in the 1950s, the uses and abuses of knowledge about the West in Gomulka's Poland, and the anticipation of war throughout Eastern Europe in the mid- to late 1950s. Sources surveyed include popular media, archival reports from East Central Europe, and reports written within the state and Party apparatuses of the countries in question. But what is really new about these essays is the resolute involvement of "transnational perspectives:" words invoked with such regularity these days as to make one suspect a trend to be avoided.³ Yet the authors show that when done seriously and imaginatively, studies involving transnational points of view can take the stories we have been told about Communist East-Central Europe to a new level.

David Tompkins provides the fullest examination we possess of the Chinese presence in Poland and the GDR during the 1950s, extending from exchanges of delegations, cultural figures, scholars, and political leaders to re-

¹ The papers were first presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies on 18 November 2011 in Washington DC.

² Notable exceptions are: GYÖRGY PÉTERI (ed.): *Imagining the West in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Pittsburgh 2010; PADRAIC KENNEY: *Carnival of Revolution. Central Europe 1989*, Princeton 2002; IDEM, GERD-RAINER HORN (eds.): *Transnational Moments of Change. Europe 1945, 1968, 1989*, Lanham et al. 2004; GÁBOR T. RITTERSPORN, MALTE ROLF et al. (eds.): *Sphären von Öffentlichkeit in Gesellschaften sowjetischen Typs. Zwischen partei-staatlicher Selbstinszenierung und kirchlichen Gegenwelten*, Frankfurt a.M. 2002.

³ For an understanding of what is involved in transnational history, see PATRICIA CLAVIN: *Defining Transnationalism*, in: *Contemporary European History* 14 (2005), 4, pp. 421-439.

ports on events within China. He depicts a struggle within East European regimes, even during high Stalinism, to make Chinese communism seem the model they believed it should be. In East Germany the propaganda effort was more successful, in part due to the shared “task” of extending communism to the entire breadth of the respective national society. Tompkins discovers that the two regimes, though different in many ways, attempted to use the Chinese model to support retrenchment as well as de-Stalinization. His findings will surprise readers who think that China, with its much lower levels of socio-economic development, may have had little relevance to East Central Europe. However it may have diverged in other ways, China shared with East Germany and Poland the predicament of needing to define a way to socialism independent of the Soviet path. Yet both the GDR and Poland joined the Soviet line vis-à-vis China from about 1960, criticizing Chinese leaders for dogmatism and other errors. The confusion over this abrupt shift was especially potent in the GDR.

Malgorzata Fidelis tells us how the Polish United Workers Party looked to the West for various kinds of inspiration on how to build—or not build—socialism. After initially believing that western Marxists could serve as allies in the global class struggle, Poland’s Communists gradually adopted the more practical view that western Marxists, if portrayed as culturally foreign and threatening, could act to bolster the Polish government’s position as pillar of order and stability against the ravages of cultural revolution. Indeed, they associated young Marxists in France or West Germany with their own “revisionist” challenge at home, and sought to delegitimize both as dangerous, decadent deformations of a healthy socialism rooted in the working class.

Fidelis’s transnational perspective thus revises our understanding of the dynamics by which the Polish Communist leadership sought to maintain power by conjuring an international coterie of enemies extending from Warsaw and Prague to Paris and London. These supposedly naïve students were carrying out agendas that had been laid out for them by “foreign powers,” meaning the United States, Israel, and West Germany. But ironically, in criticizing western “hippies,” Polish Communist leaders were siding with western regimes, which supposedly embodied the class enemy. Fidelis also tells us that this “Party line” was not so uniform. Her reading of the press shows that journalists in Communist Poland took a variety of stances on the rebellion of western youth, betraying occasional sympathy for some of their aims, such as peace and justice. Identification with western students provided such journalists with a subtle means of criticizing their own regime.

Using interviews assembled in the West at the height of the Cold War, Melissa Feinberg thematizes fear: fear of international conflict that helped shape political attitudes and behaviors of East Europeans at the height of the Cold War. Her study compellingly argues for the unintended consequences of state socialist governance. Leaders hoped that by evoking fear of class enemies, across the Iron Curtain but also at the workplace, they would intensify their citizens’ determination to outproduce the West. Yet given the direness of the

economic world in which these East Europeans lived, images of apocalyptic conflict soon came to promise relief and fear transformed into hope, in a process that Feinberg calls “wish fulfilment.” She finds such sentiments echoed in reports from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary, confirming in startling fashion images we have inherited from the Cold War of populations living under severe oppression.

Those who had escaped to the West believed they would soon return home after the successful prosecution of war by the West. If anything, people feared peace! At the same time, many refugees expressed their belief that war would be costly. Yet they felt that these costs did not outweigh the suffering they were experiencing under communism. Interviewees differed in their visions of the society that would emerge after liberation, but most felt it would be the same as before the Communist seizure of power, somehow unaffected by social revolution. They even thought that a relatively intact social order could survive nuclear destruction.

Feinberg calls such beliefs “fantasies,” based in a willingness to imagine that the United States had become all-powerful, and the Soviet Union was destined to disappear. She compares the structures of such stories to fairy tales, based on the belief that some magical potion or formula might suddenly transform reality and liberate humans from mundane concerns. Further research might show how the events of subsequent decades—like the Prague Spring—had a sobering effect that banished such wishes to the oblivion of archival storage, where they resided until Feinberg discovered them.

How do such revelations add dimensions to our understanding of East-Central Europe in the Cold War? For one thing, they help us get beyond the well-understood and oft repeated stories about high politics, concerning Soviet Bloc relations to China for example, and probe for deeper challenges and promises that faced the Soviet Union’s erstwhile allies. What did the global socialist revolution mean for the socialist revolution in East Central Europe? In particular, what did the split with China or Euro-communism signal to East Europeans about their own system? These international relations were transnational in the sense that they were not fully controlled by state or Party institutions.

Similarly, in theory we would have expected that the western left, embodying the global reach of socialist ideology, must have been a boon to East European regimes seeking legitimacy. Yet instead, careful attention to the left’s emanations across borders reveals to us the conservative (in the sense of conserving) character of Marxism-Leninism in power; in Leszek Kolakowski’s terms, the Party leaders were priests and not jesters.⁴ Fidelis’s piece makes us wonder in new ways about the state socialist public sphere, which no doubt was highly restrictive, but also possessed of a certain dynamism that the elite tried desperately to control.

⁴ LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI: *The Priest and the Jester*, in: IDEM: *Toward a Marxist Humanism. Essays on the Left Today*, New York 1968, pp. 9-37.

Finally, we see that the West could rely upon deep reservoirs of trust among East Europeans into the late 1950s, and we realize that conventional sources have told us very little about mass opinion under Stalinism. Feinberg highlights the obvious fact that East Europeans would speak clearly only after they crossed the border. Aside from the explosions of popular dissent in 1953 or 1956, we thus encounter other ways of learning about transformations of mentalities in the Soviet Bloc. All three cases show us that perspectives from within single sets of national boundaries cannot help East Europeanists resolve their most fundamental challenge, namely to explain change over time within their region of study.