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How Communism Shaped Our World



Table of Content

Introduction	9
How Communism shaped our world <i>Sophie Kühnlentz</i>	13
Living in Communism A Workshop Report <i>Miriam Eisleb</i>	17
„Education but not punishment“. The role of the Komsomol in the struggle with deviant behaviour of minors (1954–1960) <i>Alexandra Belyanskaya</i>	23
Vadim Solodnikov’s Diary: Individual and Collective in the Experiences of the Soviet Teenager (1942–1947) <i>Vladislav Iakovenko</i>	29
The Russian Revolution and Gender 1917–1929 <i>Beninio McDonough Tranza</i>	35
Female revolutionaries. Women and the Russian Revolutions in 1917 <i>Sophie Kühnlentz</i>	41
Picturing Another Future <i>Tamara Pataki</i>	47
Popular music in public spaces in the German Democratic Republic <i>Nicole Hanisch</i>	55
Remembering Communism – Apologetics and Positive Memory A Workshop Report <i>Klara Rahel Schwalbe</i>	61
	5

Sachsenhausen concentration camp memorial as a place of political confrontation of the historical memory about the Second World War in modern Germany <i>Pavlova Margarita Aleksandrovna</i>	67
The annual Rosa Luxemburg & Karl Liebknecht demonstration – Remembering the Spartacist Uprising throughout the 20th century <i>Heike Hoffmann</i>	73
The Correct Version of History <i>Eric Jeswein</i>	79
The Other Revolution: 1905 in the Soviet and Post-Soviet View of History <i>Victor Wagner</i>	83
The Moscow Metro – Shaping a Collective Historical Consciousness of Russia <i>Charlotte Kohrs</i>	89
War and Communism A Workshop Report <i>Matej Samide</i>	95
Red Terror in Russia during the Civil War <i>Kseniia Medvedevskikh</i>	101
Second World War and Great Patriotic War – two Perspectives? <i>Anne-Christine Mertens</i>	105
On Winning and Losing – Anthropological Approaches to Russian Commemorative Culture <i>Alisa Gadas</i>	113

Continuities of Remembrance. <i>The Great Patriotic War</i> in communist and post-communist societies. <i>Laura Throckmorton</i>	119
Acknowledgements	125

Introduction

In 2017, the Russian October Revolution was commemorated for its 100th anniversary. The Russian Revolution marked the beginning of the first political implementation of Marxist-Leninism, an ideology that was highly idealistic and ambitious. The revolutionaries desired to improve and reform the vast former Tsarist Empire, shaken by rural impoverishment and the strains of the First World War, and to turn Russia into a modern, industrialized state which guaranteed civil and political equality for everyone. In theory, the Bolsheviks aimed to implement a social order where everyone, regardless of their social background, gender or ethnicity, could live well and succeed. But although there were a number of social improvements and modernizations, the Soviet Union, and other states of the USSR, also became violent and oppressive regimes that arbitrarily persecuted their citizens.

Communism has had an immense impact on the 20th century and the world we live in today. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the transformation of Communist regimes in Europe in the 1990s resulted in new economic and political policies and stipulated a process of new affiliations. The perception of the Revolution, of the formerly communist systems and of the disintegration of the Soviet Union differs from country to country, in Europe and around the world, and to examine them more closely is a topic for rewarding academic inquiry.

The legacy of the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain also played and continues to play an important part in forming our organization. The International Students of History Association (ISHA), an independent, non-profit organization of students of history and related sciences, was founded in 1989 when a group of history students from Budapest took the newly emerged opportunity to travel, to connect with other students from Europe and the World and to gain new and diverse perspectives on their field of study. On our quarterly international seminars, hosted and organized by ISHA's sections all over Europe and beyond, students have the opportunity to present and discuss their own course of study and research, to learn about the academic focuses of others and to further their academic, cultural and political understanding of other countries and different approaches to studying the past. In these exchanges with our fellow students, we are frequently confronted with a multiplicity of viewpoints, a richness of different experiences and new perspectives on world events.

In this spirit, on the anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 2017, ISHA Berlin and the newly-founded ISHA Moscow organized a joint seminar to discuss How Communism shaped our World, the relevance and influence of Communism in the 20th century and the world we live in today. On our seminar, we compared the different developments of our countries' formerly Communist regimes, the Soviet Union

and the German Democratic Republic, and their commemoration practices. We chose three approaches to tackle this vast central question and organized three intensive workshops and accompanying cultural programs in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The first workshop was dedicated to “Living in Communism”. In theory, political power had been given to the people in the Soviet Union. With the implementation of State Socialism, many people, both in the Soviet Union and in the GDR, were given opportunities they had not conceived before. Yet equality regardless of social background, an ideological constituent of Communism, was compromised by the emergence of new party elites and the persecution of individuals who represented the old aristocracy. In addition, State Socialism demanded the unconditional support and cooperation of its citizens, so that secret services had extensive powers to control individuals’ personal lives. How did people adapt? How did they work, form personal commitments and lead a social and cultural life in these circumstances? What types of resistance existed? What led others to believe so firmly in the new systems?

Our second workshop dealt with the relationship between Communism and war. War and the rise of communism were often closely intertwined. The Soviet Union emerged from the October Revolution and the Civil War that followed. In Eastern Germany, the GDR was implemented as a consequence of the Soviet Union’s occupation after it had won World War II. It inflicted grave losses on the Soviet Union, and was and is remembered with both pride and grief. In this workshop, we looked at the different ways Communist states referred to the Great Patriotic War or World War II in order to derive legitimacy or to shape their policies and how it is remembered today.

Finally, our third workshop dealt with today’s memory cultures and commemoration practices in formerly Communist states. Europe was divided by ideologies for decades, and even within the respective countries, the experiences under Communist regimes are glorified, ignored or condemned. Hence the remembrance cultures of the formerly communist countries are diverse, and the approaches to commemorating the oppressions or achievements under Communist rule in the public sphere are an issue of distinct and sometimes opposing interests. It has only been 27 years since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a large part of the world population grew up, lived, worked and was politically or socially active in formerly Communist regimes. While there is the necessity to adequately commemorate the victims and to reappraise the crimes of the regimes, democratic states that have newly emerged cannot simply dismiss their citizens’ existences as lives of crime or, at best, as illusionary and failed attempts for a more equal society. How do contemporary states proceed in coming to terms with their Communist pasts? How do state institutions – foundations, schools, museums etc – act? What role do grassroots or private initiatives play? How has it shaped the public sphere? And how do people living in the succession countries perceive the communist past today?

In our seminar, 15 students from Berlin engaged with 15 students from Moscow in order to discuss our shared past. Students came from states all over Europe, including Germany, Great Britain, Hungary and Slovenia, and from Russia and the US. Students came from all levels of study, from the first year of their bachelor's to the end of their master's. Our aim was to give other students and ourselves an opportunity to study the history and impact of Communism in-depth on a five day seminar, and additionally, to grasp the academic input more thoroughly by actually seeing the localities of the Russian Revolution and to understand it more clearly by looking at museums, memorials and the cityscape.

The outcome of our exchange is a number of essays that are presented in this volume, in English, Russian and German. They are subdivided under the subheadings Living in Communism, War and Communism and Remembering Communism, which reflect the workshops we held during the seminar as well as the cultural program, which revolved around these central themes. The essays reflect the individual focuses participants chose to study before, during and after our joint time in Russia. In our project, we were generously funded and supported by the Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur (Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Past in Eastern Germany) as a part of their project „Der Kommunismus: Utopie und Wirklichkeit“ (Communism: Utopia and Reality). Thanks to their support, students could participate based on their motivation and interest in the topic, without any personal expenses and regardless of their financial background. We would like to thank the participants for their inputs and enthusiasm, their contributions during the workshops and their hard work on the essays collected in this volume. Moreover, we would like to thank the proofreaders and editors of this publication for their help. We hope that it will be an intriguing reading matter to everyone and a lasting memory of this exchange.

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