

Conference Report

How did processes of transformation and modernization threaten the stability of elites in the Soviet bloc and the Iberian Peninsula after the Second World War? How did elites respond to these processes? And how did actors within various social strata both promote and respond to such processes of change? These were some of the questions raised at the Ph.D. Workshop "Social Change and Political Continuity: Erosion and Stabilisation of Authoritarian Regimes in the 1950s and 60s," held at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies on May 27-28, 2011.

The workshop sought to examine how regimes within the Soviet bloc and the Iberian peninsula underwent parallel processes of erosion and stability, and set out to tackle two main questions. Firstly, whether the conceptual pair erosion/stability was a valid one for thinking about authoritarian regimes; secondly, whether Eastern European socialist regimes and the right-wing regimes of the Iberian Peninsula could be compared. As it turned out, the first question received a great deal of heated discussion; the second, less so.

The first panel examined the ways in which elites responded to widespread social changes in the 1950s and 1960s. Split into two parts, the first examined the elites themselves, while the second looked at myths and rituals that legitimised authoritarian regimes. ALEKSANDRA WITCZAK HAUGSTAD (Oslo), giving an overview of economic decision-making from 1945 to *Solidarność*, argued that economists in Poland were increasingly frozen out of policy-making as Marxist-Leninist science usurped orthodox ('bourgeois') economic science. She concluded that party ideology, economic planning, and the beliefs of academic economists increasingly grew apart. While in Poland, 'bourgeois' economics was condemned, ANNA CATHARINA HOFMANN (Freiburg), by contrast, showed that such 'bourgeois' economics was a key part of the Spanish elite's policy of "desarrollismo". Her paper concentrated on a young generation of economic planners enlisted by the regime as part of a post-ideological attempt to modernize Spain. However, these attempts to westernise in order to re-legitimate the regime were ultimately counter-productive as they served as a base for criticism by various social groups (academia, Catholic Church, Workers' movement, etc.) who particularly pointed out the "social failure" of Spanish planning: thus, modernization was inherently de-stabilizing. CHRISTIANE ABELE (Freiburg) likewise suggested that the Portuguese elites' attempts to rally the country around the defence of its colonial possessions, and its inability to create a consensus, began to erode its authority from the 1960s onwards. As various groups on the left and from within the church began to defy the regime's authority and criticise its colonial wars, legitimacy slowly drained away from the regime.

These papers seemed to suggest a certain tension between experts and stable rule in authoritarian regimes. In Hofmann's paper, there was a palpable sense that modernization was necessary but counter-productive, while Haugstad's paper seemed to suggest an inevitable conflict between 'genuine' economic science and Marxist-Leninist economics. Abele's presentation, meanwhile, painted a picture of a regime which, lacking in any sort of means for tapping popular energies, was in a long-term process of collapse. Discussion centred around the real-world mechanisms for criticisms within these regimes and how far

these could be viewed as factors in the erosion of legitimacy, as opposed to “hard factors”, such as economic performance.

While the first part of the panel looked at elite politics, the second was focused on cultural politics. ÁNGEL ALCALDE FERNÁNDEZ (Zaragoza) argued that veterans’ organisations played an important legitimising role as bearers of what he termed the “war culture” of the Franco regime. He showed that in the immediate post-war period, rituals were centred around concepts of “unity” and “sacrifice” but that this model changed as Spain turned towards a policy of “desarrollismo” in the 1960s. Similarly, CONSTANTIN CLAUDIU OANCEA (EUI Florence), looked at Ceaușescu’s “Song to Romania” festival. His paper suggested that, although individual observance of these rituals was heterogeneous, the nation-wide festival served as an institution of stability, through the creation of rituals and myths of Romanian greatness. Thus, these papers argued – particularly cogently in Oancea’s case – that cultural politics, in the form of rituals and festivals were an important means for stabilization. However, as TILL KÖSSLER (Bochum) rightly pointed out, a bottom-up perspective would be necessary to discern how individual participants perceived such rituals, and therefore how effective they actually were.

The second panel, meanwhile, took a closer look at the actors themselves, as speakers analysed particular social groups and their interactions with the ruling structures. ANDRÉS ANTOLÍN HOFRIKTER (FRIAS) provided evidence of the erosion of Francoist authority as he showed how historians at the *Centro de Estudios Históricos Internacionales* moved from producing regime-friendly history to an essentially oppositional grouping, devoted to documenting the Civil War. But while this paper (and most of the other papers on the Iberian peninsula) suggested an outright draining of authority for the regime, the remaining speakers suggested that within the Soviet Union the relationship between regime and various intellectual and artistic groups was a great deal more ambiguous. MICHEL ABESSER (FRIAS) discussed the Moscow jazz scene of the 1960s, showing how so-called “Youth Cafés” became a site around which various relationships between officialdom and grass-roots enthusiasts played out. The “Soviet for Youth Café Orchestras” gained legitimacy by its prominent staff of composers, teachers, and representatives of the Party and the Komsomol and helped establishing improvisation, something despised by ‘experts’ as a substitute for ‘real’ musical training, as a legitimate practice in music. The paper thus suggested the existence of cultural spaces which were both official, yet somewhat deviated from the values held in the high corridors of power. SIMON HUXTABLE (Birkbeck), in his paper on journalists at Soviet youth newspaper *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, reiterated this idea, suggesting that the material that appeared in the press was not always approved of by those in the highest corridors of power. Personal relationships and informal practices, he argued, could be every bit as important as the official rules and went on to envisage ‘the regime’ as a series of interlocking personal relationships with individuals of differing viewpoints. SAMANTHA SHERRY (Edinburgh), who discussed Soviet translators of Western literature and their censorship of texts, presented another kind of complexity. In an intriguing presentation, she argued that translators occupied a complex position between the Soviet Union and the West. Translators attempted to resist the worst excesses of censorship, but, at the same time, were unrepentant about their own self-censorship of texts, without which many works would not have been published. Thus, like Abesser and

Huxtable, she suggested that the agency of cultural agents in authoritarian regimes was a rather complex phenomenon, varying in different contexts.

Inherent in these speakers 'micro-historical' approaches seems to be a belief that state-society relations are best understood through reference to interactions between the highest levels of power and other groups – and within the groups themselves. Certainly, there is much to be said for such perspectives: they tend to go beyond thinking about authoritarian societies in terms of repression/resistance, and prefer instead to look at how state-society relations were fulfilled in the breach, rather than through formal institutional relationships. Nevertheless, it is striking that the groups analysed by many of the participants across the conference tended to congregate around the intelligentsia, whether artistic or academic (economists, historians, planners, journalists, translators). Less educated, and less *formalised*, sectors of society tend to be more difficult to analyse using the methods presented there, and thus there was a certain gap "from below" within all of these presentations, which mostly attempted to tell history "from the side" (to use Richard Stites' term). JAN ECKEL (FRIAS) therefore raised a key question when he asked how far these micro-level case histories could be extrapolated to wider social, let alone international, contexts. Was it a question of accumulating case studies, as one participant suggested, or was a wider variety of perspectives necessary? Furthermore, as JÖRN LEONHARD (FRIAS Freiburg) asked, were these perspectives not simply a way of bringing a certain notion of the "strong" state in through the back door?

Despite similar approaches, genuine comparison between Spanish and Portuguese regimes, on the one hand, and Eastern European ones on the other proved difficult, since the isolated examples provided were somewhat too heterogeneous, and dealt with timeframes that were too different for general tendencies to be discerned. Nevertheless, on the basis of these papers, we might conclude that it was socialist regimes which possessed more durable strategies for survival, since Abesser, Sherry, and Huxtable's papers all suggested to a certain extent that participants in the Soviet cultural field accepted certain (patronage-led) rules of the game, even if they did not approve of them. The papers of Hofmann, Antolín Hofrichter, and Abele, meanwhile, suggested that even within Spanish and Portuguese elites, regimes enjoyed comparatively less legitimacy, and thus that erosive tendencies were more difficult to control. That socialist regimes were shown to be more stable than the "bureaucratic-authoritarian" regimes in Spain and Portugal is hardly surprising: they *were* more stable. At the end of the period covered by this conference, the Socialist regimes of Eastern Europe had almost twenty years left, while those on the Iberian peninsula had only a handful. Thus, we might have expected to see 'erosion' loom larger in Spain and Portugal than in the Eastern bloc states, and, by and large, that is what we did see.

But, as several participants asked, how useful is a stabilization/erosion paradigm that would, despite the organisers' claims in their introductory address, seem to be irredeemably teleological? Of course, every historian knows that teleological concepts are bad for your health: they too readily anticipate the already-known future and they ignore the contemporaries for whom (to appropriate the title of Alexei Yurchak's now-seminal 2006 work) "everything was forever until it was no more"[1]. But Yurchak's work, cited by a number of the conference's participants, bears an interesting relationship to the stabilisation/erosion couple discussed at the conference. "Everything Was Forever ..."

shows how, after Stalin's death, Soviet discourse ossified into a series of unchanging clichés while, at the same time, sections of Soviet youth engaged in a massive disinvestment from state structures _while simultaneously existing within those structures_. The result was neither outright erosion, nor stability *per se*, but a combination of the two, which made the Soviet Union's ultimate demise surprising yet utterly predictable to its contemporaries. Yurchak's monograph, then, can be seen as making an argument about erosion and stability which nevertheless maintains the openness of the given historical situation. So maybe, like the occasional glass of red wine, the 'erosion' and 'stabilisation' paradigm might not so bad for you after all. Used carefully, and in tandem, the two terms might constitute a conceptual pairing that could go beyond mono-causal explanations, and the constant need to explain 'what really happened', as the conference organisers argued in their introduction. Though a handful of papers in this conference were successful in doing this, by presenting a dynamic relationship between regimes and social actors, it would have been fascinating to see whether such an approach could be applied to a wider variety of cases. Nevertheless, the conference organisers are to be commended on putting together such an ambitious conference. The papers were of a high standard; the debate was well-informed and interesting; and the theoretical issues discussed will surely continue to inform the work of the participants for some time to come.

Anmerkungen:

[1] Alexei Yurchak: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton 2005.

Simon Huxtable
Birkbeck College, University of London

Workshop:

Panel 1: "Elite claims to power: Strategies of Stabilisation and Mobilisation and processes of social change"

ALEKSANDRA WITCZAK HAUGSTAD (Oslo): "Economists, the Communist Regime and the Legitimisation of Economic Policies in Poland. Origins and Outcomes of the 1956 crisis."

HOFMANN, ANNA CATHARINA (Freiburg): "Modernisation out of the Spirit of Counterrevolution. Spain under Franco (1950-1975)"

ABELE, CHRISTIANE (Freiburg): "Crisis, what Crisis? The Portuguese New State and the Anti-Colonial Challenge in the 1960s"

Dr. JAN ECKEL (FRIAS Freiburg): Comment

FERNÁNDEZ, ÁNGEL ALCALDE (Zaragoza): "Spanish Veterans of War and Discourses of Memory in the Franco-Regime"

OANCEA, CONSTANTIN CLAUDIU (EUI Florence): "Mass Culture Forged on the Party's Assembly Line: Political Festivals in Socialist Romania (1948-1989)"

Dr.TILL KÖSSLER (LMU München): Comment

Panel 2: "Society, Science and Culture: Individual and Collective Experiences and Practices"

ABESSER, MICHEL (Freiburg): "Informal, but Accessible for All? - Jazz in the Soviet Union (1953-1970)"

HOFRICHTER, ANDRÉS ANTOLÍN (Freiburg): "From the Catholic Empire to Failed Modernisation. History and Science Politics in Franco Spain under the Sign of *Desarrollismo* (1950-1975)"

HUXTABLE, SIMON (London): "The Rules of Soviet Journalism: *Komsomol'skaia pravda* and the Transformation of the Soviet press (1953-1968)"

SAMANTHA, SHERRY (Edinburgh): "Between Dissent and Control: The Roles of the Soviet Translator (1955 - 1965)"

JOACHIM VON PUTTKAMER (Jena): Comment

Final Discussion, Introduction by Ulrich Herbert (Freiburg)