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*How Do We Write the History of Communism?*

*Historical Research and the Challenge of post-Communism*

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Dear colleagues,

what I am presenting is part of a larger research network entitled “legacies of communism” which will start on 1 April at the ZZF. The “legacies network” consists of partners in Ukraine, Estonia, Poland, Hungary, Georgia and Israel. I would like to discuss here today the basic idea of the project and the way we will go about our research. But at the beginning, I will present some personal thoughts about what I would deem to be the “legacies of communism” in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space.

Where can we start? Maybe with the suggestion that the overall picture is, as always, complex and somewhat confusing.

There are many legacies of communism. The communist movement, communist power in the Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe and throughout the world changed over time and had numerous regional variants. Many observers would also agree that there is something distinctly post-communist or post-Soviet about the societies that emerged after the collapse

of the party-states in Europe in 1989/91. Communist power has left a specific footprint on Eurasian politics and societies that may be examined. And it continues to exist in various ways throughout Asia and Latin America – which is not our subject today but ought to be kept in mind (communism is not only history!).

Maybe it is easiest to start with a surprising observation: Marxist ideology does not seem to be the main legacy of communist rule. In most Western countries as well as in the developing world, communist parties have become marginal, while successor organizations of most of the former party states can no longer be considered communist. Even in Russia itself the successor to the once mighty Party is just another pawn in the Kremlin's political game. In Eastern Europe former communist parties have adopted various national or populist political positions. Thus, a century after the October Revolution the legacies of the communist movement and of communist power vary greatly and are often contradictory. What can we focus upon?

In the years following the collapse of communist power in Europe a dominant narrative was established: the “peaceful revolution” in Eastern and Central Europe and the mostly non-violent Soviet collapse were celebrated as the civil end to a violent century. Francis Fukuyama famously declared the “end of history” which was achieved through a “worldwide liberal revolution”. According to this narrative, the West had regained the optimism lost in 1914 and was bound to triumph on a world historical scale after 1989. Peaceful change remained the key focal point. On close inspection, however, these interpretations were questionable from the beginning. Neither the rise of communist China after 1989 or Putin's Russia, nor the wars in the former Yugoslavia fit the interpretation. Yet it took the Russian war against Ukraine in 2014 to discredit this interpretation and to acknowledge that the temptations of authoritarianism, geopolitics and the perils of war are still present in Europe

– especially but not exclusively in the post-Soviet space. The looming question is how recent developments are tied to the communist past.

Where do we begin? I would propose to start with the Russian revolution.

The most lasting and influential single legacy of communist rule, I have argued, is the Leninist party-state. Instead of withering away – as Karl Marx had predicted – the modern state was transformed by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” turned out to be the rule of a hierarchically structured party that dominated the state and declared war not merely on the remnants of the old regime but on independent society as such. The communist party controlled both the army and the secret police – the main enforcers of state power. From the beginning of communist power in late 1917 the unrestrained use of violence, the desire to control economic activity, to subjugate civil society and to control public and private spaces became trademarks of this type of statehood. The party-state formed the basis for the social transformations that communist parties aspired to. A new type of regime was formed; its state machine as well as the federal structure of the USSR adopted in 1922 were an influential paradigm and impressed friends and enemies in Europe and beyond. In 2016, this Leninist party-state model is still ruling in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam. As a blueprint it certainly impacted also on non-communist dictatorships around the globe.

The Leninist state placed a small group of leaders at the center of political power. Party and state had a militarized structure and were organized around chains of command with the party leader taking the role of commander-in-chief. In reality, however, the functioning of the party apparatus was more complicated than its hierarchical structure. While on paper a formalized structure, internal party politics were highly informal. They could be broken

down into personal and regional networks of strongmen that controlled segments of the party-state as well as economic resources. Within these webs of patron-client-relationships personal trust and loyalty outweighed institutional frameworks or ideological differences. To outsiders the internal dealings of the party-state remained opaque. This lack of transparency contributed to the widespread perception that power and society were strictly separated spheres – “us” and “them” – a characteristic divide for dictatorships in general and communist rule in particular. Those who held power were sometimes respected but more often feared. This fear of the party-state and its security services led to widespread distrust of the state and its intentions, especially during the founding phase of communist state but to a lesser degree also after revolutionary radicalism waned.

The destruction of the traditional ruling classes under communist rule – the nobility as well as the clergy and parts of the *intelligentsia* – could not be reversed. New social and ethnic groups advanced under communist power. To a somewhat lesser degree this was also true for Eastern European countries. Thousands of the old elites fled, only few survived in niches while even fewer returned from exile after 1989/91. None of the post-communist states re-introduced the monarchy as a national symbol and few gave returnees from exile a prolonged chance in politics. The duration of communist rule and the proximity to the West seems to make a difference. While Eastern Europeans of the 1990s could still imagine a political life before communism this was much harder in the former USSR. There were, e.g., no remnants of Russian liberalism to return to. Seventy years of party rule and isolation had wiped out any experience with pluralistic systems. This proved to be an important distinction between Eastern Europe and Russia – with Ukraine being a borderland between these two areas.

What the populations witnessed during Stalinism and beyond was not the emergence of a rational and planned new order. Rather, from the beginning communist policies were often improvised and determined by situational contingencies. This nature of communist power contributed to a sense of uncertainty that tainted social life. The population learned how to live through extraordinary times, they adapted to new, mostly unwritten, rules, learned when to speak up and when to remain silent, what to remember and what to rather forget and passed this knowledge on to their children. Thus, the mores and values of societies under communist rule were shaped. A characteristic political and social fabric emerged. And it persisted even after the death of the revolutionary leaders. Thus, the revolution and its radical phase did not merely leave a mark on history; its impact on societies, their structures and their values continues to be felt beyond the lifetimes of Stalin.

Communist rule changed profoundly after the death of Stalin. The process of de-Stalinization had several consequences. First and foremost it meant the end of mass-violence and terror by communist states in Europe and in the USSR. The result was that after 1956 the communist world witnessed unprecedented pluralism. The end of terror and mass-mobilization in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe meant that another type of communism could be created that was no longer the product of notions of civil war.

Those who survived the camps and internal exile were gradually released during the 1950s and re-admitted into society. The momentous consequences of this process for (post-) Soviet societies are still poorly understood. We now know that the history of forced labor did not end with the liberation of millions of prisoners. The liberated prisoners brought legacies of their violent experiences back into the mainstream of society. Many of those who returned had trouble adjusting to everyday life in the USSR and continued to live according

to the rules and the criminal culture of the camps. While mass-violence by the party-state ended, low scale criminal violence permeated society. A new culture of criminal gangs emerged whose roots can be traced back to bonds forged and values adapted in the GULag. Despite the end of mass-repression, societies under communist rule did not simply liberalize after Stalin. They retained many distinct features that stemmed from the Stalinist period but played out differently in the decades after 1956. The workplace – whether a factory, institute or collective farm – continued to be a central place that administered most provisions and social services like housing, child care or access to holiday resorts. Social relation revolved around work: This held true in the USSR as well as in Eastern Europe. In 1987 Finn Sievert Nielsen published a panorama of Soviet life under late socialism. Nielsen observed that people lived their lives on separate “islands”. He described how they could congregate and exchange rare goods and commodities in a country where public spaces were regulated and autonomous civic organizations could not be founded. The limited opportunities of socialist subjects often led to frustration because of constant shortages, inefficiencies and incongruities of the system. For much of the population everyday life was about getting the best out of one’s connections, building a private life at the dacha or escaping the distinct “greyness” of reality through consumption of vodka – both at the workplace and after hours. Today, late socialist habits continue to shape both private life and public behavior. From the elites down to the ordinary people the notion of a weak yet unpredictable state combined with the importance of personal networks of trust continued to shape political, economic and social life.

In some respects, the legacy of late socialism in Eastern Europe and the former USSR decisively differ. One important factor is the experience of war and militarized violence. After decades of peace the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 – a war that

would shape Soviet as well as post-Soviet societies in different ways. European Soviet allies did not participate in military action at the Hindu Kush. They continued to foster large armed forces until 1989 when they quickly disarmed. De-militarization was part of the escape from communism. Central European countries prepared to join NATO and de-politicized their armed forces while the former Soviet Army was merely downsized: It remained largely unreformed and closely tied to those in power. Already during perestroika and on an even larger scale under Russia's first post-Soviet leader Boris Yeltsin the military fought on the southern periphery. After 1991 the army viewed itself as a force of order that was needed in troubled times. It took the side of Boris Yeltsin during his confrontation with the Supreme Soviet – Russia's elected parliament – in October 1993 and thereafter the armed forces became a pillar of his rule

These arguments about war and violence have already taken us into the post-Soviet period. But let's return to the collapse of communism in Europe for a brief moment.

In retrospect the disparities between 1989 in Eastern Europe and 1991 in the Soviet Union are striking. While the revolutions in Eastern Europe were characterized by growing dissent, social movements, dialogue and the advent of political pluralism, the back-room deals of 1991 in the USSR had a much different character. In the Soviet Union communist power was ended by the August putsch and Yeltsin's counter-coup in the second half of that year. There was no all-Union round table in 1991 but secret negotiations in the Belarussian backwater Belavezha between representatives from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. While former functionaries like Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk or Nursultan Nazarbaev seized power and wealth in their republics, dissidents-turned-politicians like Václav Havel or Lech Wałęsa aspired to a moral revolution in the CSSR and Poland. Thus, the drive for liberalization of the political order and for confronting the communist past was much larger in Eastern Europe.

In this way the endgames of communism determined its legacy. While the nation states of Eastern Europe set out to dismantle the pillars of the Leninist state, former Soviet republics – with the notable exception of the Baltic States – were more reluctant to embrace political change.

After 1989/91 the political *culture* of the party-state proved to be more influential than its ideological foundations (An argument I have already put forward at the beginning of my talk). Personal power continued to outweigh institutional mandates throughout Eastern Europe and in the post-Soviet space. More often than not politics was less about concrete policies and agendas. Rather, it was dominated by national and regional actors able to distribute resources among their supporters. Different political cultures certainly mattered here – the moral standards of the former opposition in Central Europe, critical media and an emerging public sphere could serve as a counterweight to these traditions. Still, the old practices proved hard to surmount. A specific style of doing politics continued to dominate in post-communist countries: institutions – political parties, parliaments, independent courts – proved hard to build. They remained weak while those (male) networks once formed under communism turned out to be durable as well as flexible. Personal networks and informal practices inherited from socialism but also re-invented might actually have been even more influential in post-Soviet economic practice than before and also prospered in other realms of social life such as culture, academia or sports.

The precarious status of institutions resulted in a weak rule of law. The anticipated expansion of the realm of “liberty and property” did not materialize because there was no independent judiciary able to guarantee either. Where communist power had subdued the judiciary and turned it into a political instrument, rebuilding it remained a challenge many states failed to meet. This was also due to the strong standing of the procuracy and the



(secret) police under communist rule. The KGB or the East German Stasi – to name the most infamous examples – carried much weight and it took great efforts to dismantle their structures and to investigate the many ways in which they had penetrated society. Naturally, this proved to be easier in Germany where the communist East voted to join the larger Federal Republic than in Russia or other post-Soviet states where the structures of the KGB remained largely unscathed and where Boris Yeltsin was able to use the old structure to consolidate his power.

In the long run the question of lustration and the build-up of alternative security structures were crucial for the political system. Where the secret police remained largely untouched they could shake off the traditional oversight by the party and even expand their power.

Lustration itself was often a painful process marred by political intrigue, denunciation and power play. The debate about the content of secret police files poisoned public discourse in many post-communist states. Yet, ultimately lustration was the way to liquidate hidden Stalinist structures and come to terms with the past. Overall the communist secret police could be dismantled and its legacy overcome, but it clearly took political will and struggle.

The size of the anti-communist opposition was also decisive. In most countries it consisted only of a few hundred to a few thousand activists. The main exception is Poland where a complete counter-society had emerged since the 1970s. From the 1970s onwards Polish opposition activists could develop alternatives to the party-state and its values and were ready to take political responsibility. In Czechoslovakia the former opposition activist Václav Havel was elected president, although he would remain somewhat on the margins of a political field dominated by post-communist practices. Still, a figure like Havel at the helm of the state provided guidance, legitimacy and authority during the difficult 1990s. Havel and Lech Wałęsa in Poland or Vytautas Landsbergis in Lithuania certainly defined themselves and

their political agenda differently than Boris Yeltsin or Leonid Kutchma in Ukraine. They were state builders and not just power brokers. Overall, it made a decisive difference whether a strong opposition including prominent public actors had emerged during late socialism and whether these groups were willing to enter the political arena or whether they stood on the sidelines as most of the Russian intelligentsia did. Where the opposition did not join the political game, it left room for the old elites.

Integration into Western institutions such as the European Union was an important incentive to break with the authoritarian traditions of communism and build a law based-state. For Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Baltics such policies could be promoted as a “return to Europe”. Still, post-1989 political leaders in Eastern Europe were walking a tightrope: they had to be reformers and conservatives at the same time. While they were expected to fundamentally change the economic system and produce long awaited prosperity, they were also expected to guarantee stability and preserve those social benefits of late socialism that the population valued. Needless to say this was at best difficult. In those countries that opted for democratic elections and a parliamentary system the difficulties associated with post-communism often led to repeated changes in government. In Central Europe in the 1990s it was nearly impossible for any political party to get re-elected. Even in Poland frustrated voters voted the ousted (post-)communists back into power – something unthinkable in the immediate aftermath of 1989 when the representatives of the old regime were discredited and resented.

What at the time was often perceived as instability in some countries effectively paved the way to more democratic procedure. As governments changed and power was peacefully transferred institutions could develop. This was the case in central Europe from Slovenia to

Poland and in the Baltic States. But even here the road to democracy was hardly smooth. Already in the 1990s states like Slovakia under Vladimír Mečiar flirted with authoritarian rule. On the whole though the region's transformation under neo-liberal auspices brought initial pain but also mid-term economic success. The economy but also society and culture evolved more rapidly in Poland with its spirit of reform than e.g. in post-Soviet Ukraine where the influence of Soviet legacies initially remained strong. However, twenty-five years later the states of Eastern and Central Europe have still not fully caught up to their Western aspirations. Some – like Hungary under Viktor Orbán or the Poland of Jarosław Kaczyński – are once again drifting towards an authoritarian order.

Most post-Soviet states – with the notable exception of the Baltic countries – took a much different road. After 1991, Central Asia and the Caucasus suffered from weak statehood, lack of legitimacy and continued repression. Here Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika took a very different form than in the Slavic republics. In these regions the attempt to build new institutions was at best half-hearted. In most instances local party chieftains continued as autocratic rulers of sovereign states. In the best case they strove for some version of authoritarian modernization as in Kazakhstan under Nursultan Nazarbaev, while in the worst case communist rule was transformed into outright despotism as in Turkmenistan of *türkmenbaşı*. Generally, the hybridity of these regimes may be noted. They combine elements of the Soviet past with authoritarian features, autocratic power and attributes of Western statehood. Some of the states like Kirgizstan or Georgia did attempt to reform themselves and flirted with accountable government and democracy. Others remained stagnant and repressive through a long post-Soviet winter.

Thus, a quarter of a century after the fall of communism in Europe and the former USSR the picture remains mixed. Clearly decades of communist power have left their footprint on

these societies. In Europe we may distinguish between the results of Stalinist rule and the legacies of post-1956 late socialism. While Stalinism reshaped societies violently, late socialist practices and mentalities are influential. They include an authoritarian impulse, the weakness of institutions and civil society, xenophobia, widespread demoralization and distrust, rent-seeking elites as well as violent conflicts in the post-Soviet space. On the more positive side a craving for social justice and economic equality, support for a welfare state and the ability of the populace to deal with sometimes repressive, sometimes merely dysfunctional states remain. These findings, however, should only be taken as a starting point to thoroughly scrutinize the often enigmatic post-communist condition – a condition both similar and distinct in various places that share the experience of communist power.