

## **Physical Violence in Late Socialism: (Dis)Entangling Statehood, Labour, and the Nation**

First Annual Conference of the International Joint Research Project

“Physical Violence and State Legitimacy in Late Socialism”

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One year after the international joint research project "Physical Violence and State Legitimacy in Late Socialism" was launched in April 2011, its first annual conference took place in Regensburg.<sup>1</sup> Bringing together research questions on ethnically motivated violence, body politics, violence in labour relations, social misconduct and the (post-socialist) remembrance of violence, its aim was to explore the intertwining of the national and the social ("class") dimensions in late socialism, and the functions of physical violence in this context. As Ulf Brunnbauer (Regensburg) and Jan C. Behrends (Potsdam) pointed out in their welcome addresses, scrutinising the role of physical violence proves crucial for understanding the nature of the state socialist regimes and the causes of the European revolutions of 1989. Sabine Rutar (Regensburg) outlined the central aim of the conference, i. e. to conceive the national dimension as complex worlds of meaning that continued to be heavily interwoven with both state legitimacy practices and processes of group-building during the Communist period.

The keynote speech was held by A. Jan KUTYLOWSKI (University of Oslo) who discussed various conceptualisations of socialist states and societies. He problematised certain commonly used notions ("state socialist regimes", "communism", "East Central Europe"), discussed potential replacements ("sovietic regime") and gave an outline of the main pillars of these "sovietic regimes" – including their development from takeover and conquest, systemic consolidation and imperialistic extensions, bureaucratic maturity and crisis, to their decline and devolution. After these theoretical considerations, the screening of the Romanian film "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days" (director Cristian Mungiu, 2007) presented an intense image of the experience of physical violence, telling the story of an illegal abortion in late socialist Romania.

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed information on the project is available at <<http://www.physicalviolence.eu>>.

In the first panel on “Legacies and Remembrance”, Constantin PARVULESCU (West University of Timișoara) used the example of the aforementioned film and “Bless You, Prison” (director Nicolae Margineanu, 2002) to discuss representations of violence in Romanian cinematic productions. Although both films claimed to be historical, their representations of the socialist past varied significantly. “4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days”, on the one hand, could be labelled a thriller, as it adopts the victims’ viewpoint, their perceptions of violence and compliance with the perpetrator. “Bless You, Prison”, on the other hand, presents the voyeuristic and sadistic perspective of the perpetrators (the prison guards), thereby creating the impression of a horror movie. According to Parvulescu, the thriller genre proved to be more useful in representing the perceptions of the victims and in launching a rational discussion on the socialist past.

Katrin BOECKH (IOS, Regensburg) gave an overview of representations of violence in Ukraine. She pointed out that few regions suffered from a similar amount of violence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ranging from the forced collectivisation under Stalinist rule, the Holodomor and the political purges in the 1930s and 1940s to the persecution of Ukrainian non-conformists in the 1960s and 1970s and the catastrophe of Chernobyl. While many of these incidents aimed to annihilate Ukrainian nationalism, Boeckh argued that their remembrance strengthened it instead. After 1991, the politics of remembrance have tended to be used as an instrument for fostering the nation, depicting Ukrainians as victims of state violence and non-Ukrainians as perpetrators.

The second panel addressed ethnic interferences with the “classless, internationalist state”. Mihai MUREȘAN (Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca) focused on the Hungarian minority in socialist Romania, locating their status “between ethnic violence and social integration”. While according to the official ideology, ethnic identifications were meant to be integrated into an overarching socialist consciousness, the Hungarian minority developed an alternate identity discourse to Romanian national communism. Mureșan presented changes to and the symbolism of public spaces in Cluj-Napoca and Miercurea-Ciuc in order to delineate the development of Hungarian nationalism as well as the Romanian state’s counter measures.

Nadège RAGARU (CERI-Sciences Po, Paris) discussed the symbolic representations of Muslim minorities in late socialist Bulgaria. She exposed the symbolic policies in Blagoevgrad, a Bulgarian border town, whose public space was systematically nationalised by renaming and reshaping “Ottoman” symbols and remnants. Additionally, several cinematic productions (e.g. *Vreme Razdelno*, 1988) addressed repressive incidents of the Bulgarian-

Ottoman past. According to Ragaru, the depiction of violence in these cinematic productions were intended to legitimise the assimilation policies applied to the Turkish minority as well as the fostering of a socialist Bulgarian nation in the broader sense.

Constantin KATSAKIORIS (University of Athens) addressed aggressions against and hostile attitudes towards African students in the Soviet Union. These African students, who were invited to Soviet universities as the “future vanguard” of their countries, were often perceived as being inferior to their Soviet counterparts. The latter envied the former’s financial privileges and depicted them as parasites and spongers. In the 1960s and 1970s, such aggressive attitudes culminated in the deaths of African students. Despite their openly racist character, most incidents of violence and aggression against African students were officially subsumed under the overall category of hooliganism.

The third panel on “Politics of the Body (and the Mind)” started with a contribution by Dumitru LĂCĂTUȘU (IICCMER, Bucharest). He concentrated on the period from 1965 to 1989 when, in the atmosphere of destalinisation, Ceausescu’s state agencies employed “softer” forms of violence against its opponents – psychiatric hospitalisation was one of them. In the public space, ideas of political dissent were openly stigmatised as an illness. In cooperation with medical institutions, the Securitate translated these discourses into repressive practice.

Jennifer RASELL (ZZF, Potsdam) presented extracts from interviews with Hungarian care leavers about what it was like to grow up in care in the 1980s. She complicated the traditional divide between public and private violence by exploring the concept of the state as a violent parent. The children’s home is a public place of employment, yet there is a generalised expectation that institutional staff treat children as if they were their own. This involves an inherent ambiguity when parents smack their children.

Corina DOBOȘ (University College London / IICCMER, Bucharest) discussed Ceausescu’s pronatalist policy and its violent elements in the context of aspects like the restriction of abortions on request, the limited access to contraceptives, the limited sexual education, collectively organised gynecological controls, accompanied by poor positive incentives to having children. Her theoretical perspective contrasted the widely accepted term *biopower* with the concept of *biosovereignty*.

This panel was rounded-off by Ondřej CINKAJZL (Charles University in Prague) arguing that the sterilisation practice on Roma women in Czechoslovakia evolved as a form of violent social help, which focused on the most deprived group of Roma. Supported by scientific discourses in various fields, this controversial practice stemmed both from the

failure of Roma assimilation measurements introduced in the 1950s and early 1960s and the long term inability to solve the so-called "gypsy question" during the 1970s and the 1980s.

The closing panel of the Friday programme, titled "Heroes of Work? Violence, Agency and Labour", focused on industrial milieus of socialist Yugoslavia and Romania. In her presentation, Sabine RUTAR (IOS, Regensburg) presented riots in the docks of the northern Croatian coastal city of Rijeka in 1969 and 1971, where workers established committees against their managers and even physically attacked them, as an example to point out how investigating social discontent in labour milieus provides fruitful insights into the research debate hitherto largely focused on student protests and, even more so, on scrutinising the national dimension of inner Yugoslav conflict, as is the case also with the 'Croatian Spring' of 1971.

Călin MORAR-VULCU (Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca) described ways in which the Romanian Communist Party dealt with violent behaviour among workers in metallurgical industries in the city of Călan. He underlined the Party's successful attempts to suspend police investigations into violent acts of its members. He highlighted a shift in attitude towards what he called "everyday violence" – while first it was treated rather as a "normal" part of male worklife, it later entered the realm of the political, when workers' protests broke out in several Romanian towns.

The Saturday programme opened with a panel addressing the topic of "Male Social (Mis)Conduct". It exposed issues connected with violent subcultures in late socialist societies and their implications for the state and its ideology. Brian LAPIERRE (University of Southern Mississippi) showed that the Soviet state widely employed the label "hooliganism" as a means intended to regulate social life. As LaPierre noted, only rarely labelled as "hooligans" were those who propagated an anti-state ideology. In fact, the state-led campaigns against "hooligans" were intended to stabilise society, yet were carried out in a manner so flexible that it permitted harsh disciplinary measures but remained arbitrary and thus did not serve to successfully communicate what was to be deemed "good" and what "bad" in Soviet society.

A similar point was raised by Gleb TSIPURSKY (Ohio State University at Newark) who focused on young workers targeted by the "police popular support units". Tsipursky highlighted that the discourse of hooliganism was meant to discipline the behaviour of those who refused to take on their assigned role as a vanguard of the Soviet modernising project, particularly in Khrushchev's times.

Jeff HAYTON (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) explored the influence of violent subcultures on the de-legitimation process in the GDR. He placed his analysis on the late 1980s, showing the extremism of skinhead groups as a platform for the expression of political protest against the regime. At the same time, the regime was clearly unable to face these occurrences, mostly limiting itself to appeals to traditional antifascist stances. This culminated in 1987 when the police did not interfere during a skinhead attack against the audience of a punk concert at the Berlin Zionskirche. Public outrage followed as well as a reaction from some of the officials. The regime had to admit that neo-Nazis did exist in the declared antifascist state. In the long run, the party tried to embrace some of the subcultures through improvements in its youth policy. As Hayton pointed out, this opened up public spaces as it legitimised various nonconformist attitudes.

The last panel, entitled “Forging the Nation”, addressed the issue of violence in relation to the notion of nationality and how such violence contributed to state legitimation or delegitimation. Jens BOYSEN (German Historical Institute Warsaw) elaborated on the topic of the distance between the army and the people in late socialist Poland. The army held an ambiguous role linked to both the revolutionary and the nationalist tradition in Poland. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, the army enjoyed relatively high popularity in society since it did not exert direct violence against citizens, leaving repressive day-to-day interventions to various civil agencies and the militia.

The motif of an ambivalent state body between repressive structures and the people was also discussed in relation to the Lithuanian militia by Rasa BALOČKAITÉ (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas). The ethnical background of Soviet militia men proved to be problematic throughout the whole communist era, but particularly during the later period of *perestroika*. Baločkaitė contrasted the local oppositional forces, which were often supported by regional media, and the central authorities, who left the issue mostly underreported and unsolved. Thus the police structure and the violence it exercised could be seen as an ambivalent focal point of the long lasting nationalist conflict between the Baltic republics and the Soviet state.

Isabel STRÖHLE (Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich) presented a similar topic in the Yugoslav context – the way in which the League of Communists of Yugoslavia debated the physical violence that the state security service employed against Kosovo Albanians, and why this issue suddenly became a matter of public debate in 1966. She examined the discourse on the newly-coined term "deformations", referring to various kinds of both unlawful behavior and authority abuse. Ströhle argued that the public criticism of the use of violence intended to re-balance the fragile loyalties in the state of "brotherhood and unity"

and to re-negotiate patterns of power between the centre and the republics, without weakening the party and finally without questioning the role of the state security forces.

By means of an analysis of newspapers published in the Serbian city of Valjevo during the first phases of the Yugoslav wars, Robert LUČIĆ (ZZF, Potsdam) demonstrated how cases of desertion were instrumentalised and, in a more general sense, what kind of values revolved around the notion of wartime violence. Deserters cast a shadow on the city, defaming local soldiers and discrediting the strong local opposition to the regime. As a reaction to the "discourse of shame", a systematic effort to regain patriotism and honour was constructed.

The conference showed in which ways the concept of physical violence provides an extremely useful analytical tool. It enables academics to, on the one hand, bridge diverse topics and connect seemingly unrelated phenomena, thus revealing the plasticity of violence in the late socialist regimes, otherwise often limited to the perspective of the repressive apparatus and its victims. On the other hand, the discussions exposed the prevailing challenge for research – the practice of physical violence was ambivalent at the least, and the debate manifested the importance of a coherent theoretical grounding of this concept.

The contributions to the conference vividly explicated how, in the late socialist societies of Eastern Europe, approval and recognition were lost in realms that had been and still were crucial for the legitimation of authority. Societal conflicts could not be pacified and consequently the promise of security could not be maintained. Consequently, the state monopoly of power was increasingly put into question, as were the (violent) forms of its institutionalised practices. This process, illustrated through the conference's case studies, affirms that power cannot be maintained in the long run if organised in a strict top-down manner. In state socialism, horizontally placed violence took over from vertical violence, as Brian LaPierre pointed out. The violent practices of the Stalinist era were replaced afterwards by "softer", yet broader, more "everyday-like" forms of violence. This evoked the question of what was specifically "socialist" in late socialist violent practices. Comparative research into violent practices in eastern and western European societies since the 1960s could, Sabine Rutar concluded, shed light on questions about the "socialist nature" of violence: How was the term violence constructed semantically? When were violence practices socially acceptable and when not? What had to happen to make violence a public and thereby political matter?

## **Conference programme:**

Welcome Address: Ulf Brunnbauer, Jan C. Behrends, Sabine Rutar

A. Jan Kutylowski (University of Oslo): Patterns of Violence and Legitimacy under Communist Rule. Theoretical and Empirical Considerations with a Comparative Viewpoint.

Film: "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days" (4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile) (Romania 2007, 113 min., Director: Cristian Mungiu)

### Panel 1: Legacies and Remembrance

Chair: Jan C. Behrends

Constantin Parvulescu (West University of Timisoara): From the Gulag to the Everyday. Representations of Violence in Nicoale Marginean's "Bless You, Prison" and Cristian Mungiu's "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days".

Katrin Boeckh (IOS, Regensburg): Beyond Systemic Divides: Experience and Remembrance of Physical Violence in Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine.

### Panel 2: Ethnic Interferences with the "Classless, Internationalist State"

Chair: Ulf Brunnbauer

Mihai Mureşan (Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca): Between Ethnic Violence and Social Integration: the Status of Minorities in Communist Romania.

Nadège Ragaru (CERI-Sciences Po, Paris): Time(s) of Violence: Cinema and the Forced Assimilation of Muslim Minorities in Late Socialist Bulgaria.

Constantin Katsakioris (University of Athens): Aggressing Third World Students in the USSR. Exploring Soviet Violence against the Darker Guests, 1960-1991.

### Panel 3: Politics of the Body (and the Mind)

Chair: Michal Kopeček

Dumitru Lăcătușu (IICCMER, Bucharest): Psychiatry as Political Violence in Communist Romania.

Jennifer Rasell (ZZF, Potsdam): Violence in and around State-Run Children's Homes in Late Socialism.

Corina Doboș (University College London / IICCMER, Bucharest):  
Biopolitics beyond Stalinism: Elements of Violence in Ceausescu's Pronatalism.

Ondřej Cinkajzl (Charles University, Prague): Involuntary Sterilization of Roma Women - Continuities and Changes.

Panel 4: Heroes of Work? Violence, Agency, and Labour

Chair: Natali Stegmann

Sabine Rutar (IOS, Regensburg): The Role of Violence in Labour Relationships: Workers' Milieus and Social Identity Constructions in Late Socialist Yugoslavia.

Călin Morar-Vulcu (Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca): Violence and Agency in the Industrial Milieu in Late Socialist Romania

Panel 5: Male Social (Mis-)Conduct

Chair: Claudia Kraft

Brian LaPierre (University of Southern Mississippi): Soviet Hooliganism as a Category of Ordinary, Intimate, and Empowering Violence.

Gleb Tshipursky (Ohio State University at Newark): Worker Youth and Everyday Violence in the Late Soviet Union, 1953-1970.

Jeff Hayton (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign): "Krawall in der Zionskirche": Skinhead Violence and Political Legitimacy in the GDR.

Panel 6: Forging the Nation

Chair: Matěj Spurný

Jens Boysen (German Historical Institute Warsaw): Forcing the Workers to Feel as the Nation: The Polish Army as an Agent of Ambiguous Nation-Building in Late People's Poland (1976-1989).

Rasa Baločkaitė (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas): The Soviet Militia in Lithuania: Violent Intermediaries of State Legitimacy.

Isabel Ströhle (University of Munich): Dealing with Violent Transgressions and "Deformations" in the State Security Apparatus. The League of Communists of Yugoslavia and the SAP Kosovo.

Robert Lučić (ZZF, Potsdam): Printing the Conflict - A Casestudy of the Serbian Town Valjevo 1990/1991.