

## **“The Socialist Car” - Workshop**

Veranstalter: Berliner Kolleg für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas

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### **Bericht von:**

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Despite a large and growing corpus of research on the production, the cultural meaning, and the proliferation of the personal automobile, East Europe has generally been left out of the history of automobility. A workshop hosted by the BERLIN SCHOOL FOR COMPARATIVE EUROPEAN HISTORY (BKVGE), as well as the GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE OF MOSCOW, and sponsored by the latter institution as well as the GEMEINNÜTZIGE HERTIE-STIFTUNG was held in Berlin on June 13-14 to discuss and analyze this gap in historiography. Participants from Europe and North America convened to attempt to define “the Socialist Car.” At root of this endeavor might be one overarching question: Which lexeme should be enunciated when discussing “the Socialist Car?” In other words, are these narratives about how state socialism informs us about the car? Or are they about how the car informs us about state socialism?

Papers presented at the workshop had a clear tendency to focus on the later, and one could argue, for due reason. The automobile functioned as an extremely valued commodity in a shortage economy, and for that reason, the availability and the ownership of automobiles in state socialism created a plethora of new, dynamic relationships in a closed society.

Papers concentrated on the car in post-Stalin East Central Europe, and specifically revolved around three general themes: first, papers centering on *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of cars in socialism asked how automobility was perceived by officials and citizens after the push to produce cars intended for individual ownership en masse; secondly, papers centering on discourse history inquired about how cars were presented, and why the personal car came to take on the characteristics it did in state socialism; finally, papers focusing on the consumption of mobility looked to place the personal car into the field of consumption history.

One might beg to question why countries – that is, both leaders and citizens – in the Soviet bloc pushed for mass automobility in the late 1950s. NORDICA NETTLETON was most succinct in suggesting that after WWII, the death of Stalin, the fading of Revolutionary ideals, and with the rise of the Soviet Union as the only other superpower, a new social contract was forged between the regime and citizens. Promising to overtake and surpass the West inherently created a comparison with the capitalists beyond the Elbe; as the West began to offer more cars to more people, a (would-be morally and economically) superior Soviet model would have to be adopted. But citizens of the state would also have to be informed about the situation in the West. This was done, as

Nettleton explains, through a variety of media: exhibitions, magazine and newspaper articles, movies and films, and word of mouth translated (obviously ‘invented’) views of western automobilism to the masses. Although Khrushchev had devised a mass car-rental system, not only was the everyday man biased towards personal ownership, the political elite were so, as well. Paradoxically, as our discussions revealed, the official rhetoric of the socialist alternative to private ownership was met with poor funding and ill-management.

Of course, there were many variations to the Soviet model. If the Soviet Union moved towards the promise of personal ownership, the opposite was the case in Poland, where, as MARIUSZ JASTRZĄB suggested, the vocabulary and official perceptions of private car ownership were by-and-large a residue of the inter-War period. Polish authorities and the intellectual elite believed that personal cars were primarily used for entertainment, and it was not until the early 1970s that official rhetoric shifted to acknowledge the instrumental importance of personal cars. On the one hand, saving for cars meant that there was less money available to consume other goods, and on the other, the process of attaining a car in Poland ensured that citizens would ‘try to be good;’ supplications for cars, as Jastrząb writes, were similar to supplications to feudal lords. But the discrepancy between the promise of an everyman’s car and the process of purchasing a car revealed the chaotic and unsystematic approach authorities had in dealing with the new commodity.

While Poland was slow to accept the personal automobile as a must-have, East Germany – as LUMINITA GATEJEL and ELI RUBIN discussed in their respective papers – was forced to compete with its western counterpart and the National Socialist legacy, both of which created and maintained a view of the automobile as a good which should be available to the common Joe. In building the ‘first socialist state on German soil,’ East German planners hoped to create alternatives to the Volkswagen. They also hoped to build living environments ‘with a human face;’ in the case of the Marzahn settlement in East Berlin, architects hoped to realize an alternative to suburban automobility which was increasingly indicative of so many cities in the West. By building a settlement according to the needs of its inhabitants, Marzahn would eliminate the necessity of cars altogether. But the “car-less” settlement was plagued with a lack of parking spaces, not to mention the difficulties the police, fire department, and ambulances had arriving to the emergency.

Car consumers in East Germany, as in every country in the Soviet Bloc, had to cope with a chronic lack of spare parts and mechanic shops. KURT MÖSER examines the consequences of shortage. “Autobasteln,” or the practice of working and improving one’s car, meant that automobile-owning citizens had to learn the inroads of do-it-yourself. But tinkering with one’s car was also a “use;” in his work, Möser argued that a history of the socialist car has to include the time (and knowledge) necessary to maintain the vehicle. Whereas in the West tinkering was increasingly a past-time hobby – that is, a ‘pleasure’ – in the East it was a crucial element of car culture, and the politics of cars. For whereas popular magazines (and presumably the authorities) supported the idea of owners

building a camping table for the summer vacation, or a rack to carry goods, they looked down upon the equivalent of hot-rodding or extravagant alterations.

LEWIS SIEGELBAUM's paper on car culture in the post-Stalinist USSR similarly examined the way in which motorists interacted with their cars, and with other people connected with the car. Though the personal car was not officially projected as a must-have, a large percentage of citizens felt that they would and should have a car in the future. But obstacles in attaining and maintaining the car created (almost always masculine) social and economic networks that paralleled official ones; as Siegelbaum puts it, they functioned "on the side," although they did not necessarily symbolize resistance to an oppressive regime. Rather, they were, in form if not in content, tangential to the rise of the mass automobile in a society which had yet to substantially meet the infrastructural and material demands inherent in automobility.

CORINNA KUHR-KOROLEV asked if it makes sense to elaborate on the history of women and cars in the Soviet society, when almost no women drove (cars) in the USSR. She revealed how, even if mothers and wives were virtually prohibited from getting behind the wheel, social practices emerged around the car which incorporated the entire family. Using a variety of personal photographs and magazine images, she showed on the one hand how the car became intimately associated with the history of the family, and on the other how female Russian drivers now use the car as a form of liberation – despite negative perceptions of the 'new woman' behind the wheel.

If Siegelbaum and Kuhr-Korolev are primarily focused on everyday networks which arose from the ownership of a car – or, in other words, on those who had – GYÖRGY PÉTERI's interests revolved around those who had none. His research translated prevalent perceptions of mass mobilization through the rich genre of caricature in one satirical magazine in Hungary. By interpreting messages embedded in the pages of *Ludas Matyi*, Péteri revealed not only how automobility was projected (and, as he would have it, perceived on the ground) as a largely negative force in terms of familial relations, pedestrians' sense of security, public etiquette, social inequality, etc., he also went a step further to argue that the political and social elite saw automobility and the personal car as a crucial element in forging ahead on the path to socialism, all the while expressing little interest or concern towards the development of public transport.

That there were a variety of different paths towards automobility in the Soviet Bloc is a realization that, in and of itself, is not a new finding. However, as LUMINITA GATEJEL argued, socialist countries converged at some point along the path towards automobility. Artificially high prices, long waiting lists, the precarious relationship between automobile lovers interested in Western cars and authorities who – despite adopting Western models themselves – shunned fetishism of products from their imperialist other are common characteristics of each socialist country (in Gatejel's case, Romania, East Germany, and the USSR), even if there were significant temporal disparities.

But was the proliferation of automobile know-how unilateral, moving from the West to the East? As two of the discussants revealed, not always. The Kama Automobile Zavod,

or KamAZ trucks were (and are) valued commodities throughout the world, and the factory worked closely with international partners. However, building the plant in the 1970s necessarily disrupted the lives of the inhabitants of Naberezhnye Chelny. ESTHER MEIER related the story of many of these inhabitants, who on the one hand identified themselves through the huge production plant, and others who tried to remember the past of a vanishing village where KamAZ was built. Provocatively, she compared the discourse of the construction of KamAZ with colonial discourses. Soviet officials claimed the production factory was built on virgin soil, and workers were given a slogan to chant: “We build KamAZ, and KamAZ builds us.” But many Russians and especially Tatars disputed the slogan; whereas KamAZ was built by them, they did not identify themselves solely through the factory. KamAZ might have been a window to the West, but the factory was not the home.

Similar to KamAZ with its international partners, Fiat fostered a close business relationship with the Soviet Union and many other Comecon countries. VALENTINA FAVA’s research analyzed the decision on the one hand to sell, on the other to purchase the license of the Fiat 124 in 1966. This so-called “deal of the century” was negotiated on relatively equal terms: Fiat realized the value of expanding their market, and pushed to sell their small but technologically advanced model to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was also looking to buy a model which they could modify and perfect, with the understanding that through Soviet creativity and industriousness, the Fiat 124 could become a hallmark of Soviet culture and know-how.

One of the workshop’s aims was to analyze the similarities and differences comparatively within the East Bloc during state socialism. But the inclusion of a specialist of western mobility history proved to be very fruitful and crucial to understanding the specificity of ‘*socialist* automobility.’ GIJS MOM’s overview of the historiography raised fundamental questions about the rise of the automobile: why was the automobile received so well, and why has individual motorization persisted despite rational arguments against it? Mom also provided evidence to prove how the notion of the car’s ‘necessity’ was not only a convenient myth emerging in the 1930s, but also that discussion of the car’s ‘usefulness’ emerged with an upcoming habit of consumerism and increasing leisure practices. Hence, Mom suggested that ‘necessity’ be interpreted as a ‘social practice’ of consumption, and that mobility history be written as a history of consumption. He also urged overcoming the national when writing history of mobility.

Which brings us back to the initial point of departure: should cars tell us about socialism, or should socialism tell us about cars? Of course that is a rhetorical question, and cannot be answered in any satisfying fashion. But as Mom frequently pointed out, many of the papers and panels had an underlining tendency to talk about an eastern (or socialist) exceptionalism, even in instances where the story is a common (European, modern) one. For methodological reasons, he suggested using the car as a lens on modern society, and not building a niche. Doing so would help readjust the contours of automobilism, which not only has yet to fully include eastern Europe, but also has much to learn about the form and nature of the push towards mobility consumption, as the workshop has shown.

SERGEI ZHURAVLEV closed the workshop with a discussion about the methodological problems of studying socialist automobility: It is not exactly a history from above, and not from below, rather, to adopt Siegelbaum's term, "on the side." Zhuravlev pointed out the strengths of the workshop: it incorporated production history, social history, and cultural history in one degree or another. But the political side of the story was, he suggested, not complete. What rules, he asked, were created to cope with the car at the political level? In addition, there was little discussion about path dependency: in the Soviet Union, and certainly in many other socialist countries, there was no evolution from the horse, to the bike, to the motorbike, to the car (or, as it is also paradoxically called in Russian, the "iron horse"); what type of psychological impact did this rapid transition have on individuals? Equally as important is the dichotomy between the urban and the rural: how did the socialist landscape incorporate vehicles, and how did it contrast, for example, from Moscow, Warsaw, or Prague? What about the social component, in terms not of ownership, but of users? He pointed to the fact that many owners had chauffeurs; military personnel drove the vehicles of their higher-ups; relatives came to understand the automobile as belonging to the entire family. Did driving tactics change depending on one's status? Technologically, it is still perplexing why car technology could not be maintained by a superpower which could keep up and succeed in terms of space and military technology. While the state was very interested in cultivating fertile ground for successes in space – by inviting scholars, and encouraging critical feedback at all levels – we do not know how much incentive there was for everyday users or common factory workers to make suggestions for automotive improvements.

Of course, as Zhuravlev closed, the problem is clear: the history of automobility in eastern Europe demands the use numerous fields and methodologies, and hence a "universal researcher" seems to be required. But it is precisely at this intersection of fields that the specificity of "the Socialist Car" is enunciated. The organizers of the workshop hope to develop the papers presented at this and previous workshops in order to publish a volume on "the Socialist Car."

#### CONFERENCE OVERVIEW:

Introduction - Lewis Siegelbaum, Luminita Gatejel, Corinna Kuhr-Korolev

#### SESSION I Moderator: Luminita Gatejel

Gijs Mom, "Car Consumption History: A State-of-the-Art Overview"

Lewis Siegelbaum, "On the Side: Car Culture in the USSR, 1960s-1980s"

#### SESSION II Moderator: Manfred Hildermeier

Luminita Gatejel, "The Common Heritage of the Socialist Car Culture"

Mariusz Jastrzab, "Allocating Cars to Potential Buyers: Rulers, Preferences, and Strategies of Obtaining Cars in Poland"

#### SESSION III Moderator: Lewis Siegelbaum

György Peteri, "Private Cars and the 'Socialist Mode of Consumption' in Post-1956 Hungary"

Eli Rubin, "Reading Traffic Flows in Berlin's Karl-Marx-Allee, Landsberger Allee, and Allee der Kosmonauten"

SESSION IV Moderator: Luminita Gatejel

Esther Meier, "'We Build KamAZ, and KamAZ Builds Us.' Soviet Workers in Naberezhnye Chelny/Tatarstan

Kurt Möser, "'Autobasteln': Modifying, Maintaining and Repairing Private Cars in the GDR, 1970-1990"

Valentina Fava, "The 'Deal of the Century': Fiat and the USSR, 1966"

SESSION V Moderator: Lewis Siegelbaum

Nordica Nettleton, "Bridging Private and Public: The Role of Cars in Soviet Politics"

Corinna Kuhr-Korolev, "Women and Cars in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia"

FINAL SESSION Discussant: Sergei Zhuravlev

General Discussion

Zitierweise

Tagungsbericht "*The Socialist Car*". 13.06.2008-14.06.2008, Berlin. In: H-Soz-u-Kult, 17.07.2008, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=2191>>.