

“The Socialist Car” Workshop

Berlin, 13 – 14 June 2008

Organisers: The Berlin School for the Comparative History of Europe (BKVGE)
In co-operation with The German Historical Institute in Moscow

Supported by the Gemeinnützige Hertie-Stiftung

Organizers: Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Michigan State University/the Netherlands Institute for Advance Study), Luminita Gatejel (BKVGE), Corinna Kuhr-Korolev (German Historical Institute Moscow).

Introduction

Objects of both ridicule and "Ostalgie", cars of the "second world" countries of Eastern Europe and the USSR have only begun to be studied by historians. Like other consumer goods and practices, theirs is a history that probably could not have been written during the Cold War (or in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Communism when triumphalism reigned in the West) except in tendentious terms. Several articles, conference panels, and even a book or two are evidence that more recently a beginning has been made in comparing cars in the Communist East with the capitalist West. But to date, very little has been done to analyze the similarities and differences in the histories of automobiles *within* Eastern Europe. This is essential if we are to avoid reproducing Cold War certainties and dichotomies. To what extent were the cars of socialist countries dependent on western technological cooperation and assistance? How did each ruling Communist Party represent the introduction of passenger cars for general use? According to what methods were cars made available and to whom? What alternatives existed to the private ownership of cars? What cultural meanings were attached to cars? What kinds of ancillary or sub-cultures existed in relation to cars (e.g., auto sport, auto clubs, auto tourism, car films)? The principal objective of the colloquium on "The Socialist Car" is to explore these questions in comparative perspective. The colloquium will be held at The Berlin School for the Comparative History of Europe in Berlin (BKVGE), Germany, on the 13-14 June 2008.

Why "The Socialist Car"?

Having long fixated on political issues involving individual freedom (or the lack thereof), the nature of political decision-making, and other questions relating to Communist Party politics, historians of Eastern Europe and the USSR increasingly have turned to consumption and everyday life as dimensions no less important for understanding the peculiarities of Communist societies. Far from trivializing the history of post-war Communism, studies on housing accommodation, fashion design, pet ownership, tourism, debates about the "personal" and the "private", and other dimensions of everyday life have conveyed new and important

understandings of what it meant to live in such societies for ordinary and not-so-ordinary people.

Cars, among the most "deficit" of consumer goods, had enormous significance in Communist societies beyond their function as means of transportation. For Communist governments and their acolytes, the existence of a domestic car industry and its products signified nothing less than modernity and the promise of increased material abundance and comfort associated with it. Cars also served, however, as symbols of individual freedom and mobility, markers of prestige, sources of (often illicit) income, the basis for the assertion of male gender power, and a number of other heterodox purposes and practices. They thus are extremely useful articles of material culture for analyzing the ideological work of respective Communist parties and consumption regimes. Automobiles also signal other processes, including the distribution of privilege, informal networks among the population, and intra-Bloc trade patterns. Studying the "Socialist Car" also can help us better understand the post-Communist frenzy for automobiles (of certain types) as well as national variations in road and car cultures and what is referred to as "automobility."

Program

13 June:

- 9:00 Welcome/Introduction - **Lewis Siegelbaum; Luminita Gatejel, Corinna Kuhr-Korolev**
- 9:15 - 10:15 **Gijs Mom**, "Car Consumption History: A State-of-the-Art Overview"
- 10:15 - 11:15 **Lewis Siegelbaum**, "Roadlessness and the 'Path to Communism': Building Roads and Highways in Stalinist Russia"
- 11:15 - 12:15 **Luminita Gatejel**, "The Common Heritage of the Socialist Car Culture"
- 12:15 LUNCH
- 14:00 - 15:00 **Mariusz Jastrzab**, "Allocating Cars to Potential Buyers: Rulers, Preferences, and Strategies of Obtaining Cars in Poland"
- 15:00 - 16:00 **György Peteri**, "Private Cars and the 'Socialist Mode of Consumption' in Post-1956 Hungary"
- 16:00 - 17:00 **Eli Rubin**, "Reading Traffic Flows in Berlin's Karl-Marx-Allee, Landsberger Allee, and Allee der Kosmonauten"
- 17:00 - 18:00 **Esther Meier**, "We Build KamAZ, and KamAZ Builds Us. Soviet Workers in Naberezhnye Chelny/Tatarstan"

18:00 - 19:00 General discussion of papers, plans, etc.

14 June:

9:00 - 10:00 **Kurt Möser**, "Tinkering with/Repairing/Modifying Cars in East Germany"

10:00 - 11:00 **Valentina Fava**, "The 'Deal of the Century': Fiat and the USSR, 1966"

11:00 - 12:00 **Nordica Nettleton**, "Bridging Private and Public: The Role of the Car in Soviet Politics"

12:00 - 13:00 **Corinna Kuhr-Korolev**, "Women and Cars in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia"

13:00 - 14:30 LUNCH

14:30 - 16:00 Final discussion, conclusions, plans, etc.

Contact:

Luminita Gatejel
BKVGE
Koserstr. 20
14195 Berlin
Tel.: 030-83856826
Email: lumagatejel@yahoo.com