"Re-Constructing Perestroika(s): In Search of a new Vocabulary for the Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia"

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The "Re-Constructing Perestroika(s): In Search of a new Vocabulary for the Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia" workshop took place at the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, March 14-15, 2024. It is the first in a series of events planned under the aegis of the *Perestroika from Below*, project, which is funded by an Advanced Grant by the European Research Council (ERC) with **Juliane Fürst** (Leibniz Center for Contemporary History (ZZF, Potsdam) as Principal Investigator. As the name suggests, the project challenges the conventional Moscow-centric understanding of Perestroika as enacted from above with its narrow focus on the political and cultural elites and institutional dynamics. Instead, it seeks to expand accepted chronology and geography, by considering Perestroika as a longer period that started prior to 1986 and continued well into the 1990s and, perhaps, even beyond, and which was not limited to the USSR, but rather manifested itself across Central and Eastern Europe under various other terminologies, including but not limited to "changes", "transformation", "transition", and "reform", each term with its own merits and limitations. By bringing into the conversation other, less studied and often ignored actors, ideas and debates, the project focuses on people's thoughts, feelings and actions, and the complex social processes that shaped lived the experience(s) of Perestroika.

Early on, the project established a very productive intellectual partnership with scholars working on Perestroika-related topics at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences (Prague) and Georgetown University (Washington D.C.). The Prague workshop, co-organized by the three institutions, is the first, but not the last product of this cooperation and will be followed by *Processing Perestroika* (to be held at Georgetown University) and *Appropriating Perestroika* (to be held at ZZF, Potsdam).

DAY ONE

The program of the two-day workshop reflected the urge to de-centralize and expand our conversation about Perestroika by bringing into the picture a wider range of specific actors and regional case studies and to explore manifestations of Perestroika in various spheres of cultural, intellectual, organizational, and economic activity. The opening panel titled **"Perestroika as a Local and Professional Community Event"** included three such case studies: photographic collectives in Ryazan and Nizhny Novgorod, historic preservation activists in Leningrad and local memory activists in Ukraine. Besides their interest in various manifestations of grass-root activism, the three speakers shared a focus on emotions and on memory, one of Perestroika's central concepts and preoccupations.

Victoria Musvik (University of Oxford) introduced her paper "De-centralizing Perestroika: Local Russian Photographic Communities, Alternative Socialism and Unbroken Memory" by admitting that her larger research was born out of bewilderment at the contemporary selective amnesia about the collective feelings of

Perestroika, especially the positive ones. What happened to hope, empowerment, historical agency and solidarity that so many people experienced at the time? Why and how did Perestroika in general, and the independent photographic movement in particular (which began at least ten years earlier but really flourished in the late 1980s, having captured the concerns, anxieties and feelings of the era) ultimately fall into a "memory hole", so that complex structures of experience become flattened, emotions – impoverished, affects – conflicted and reflection – blocked? What is the nature of this lacuna and these frozen emotions?

While on the surface of things, the post-Soviet trauma of the 1990s and Putin's subsequent memory politics offer some explanation, Musvik argued that the memory-blocking is the result of local, non-central participants of Perestroika being ousted from mainstream historical narrative and central politics. Since the mid-1970s independent, amateur and underground local photographers that Musvik studies experimented with new topics and techniques in their work and entered new, previously out-of-reach spaces like prisons, asylums and orphanages. Ryazan's local networks and spaces that these photographers were part of, played a more important role in the parallel public sphere and were often more resilient in holding on to democratic values after 1991 than the centrally situated clusters of *neformaly* in Moscow or Leningrad. They shared a wide range of concerns and activities, from environmental protection to female photography, preservation of historical memory and creation of free press and even participated in the local government. Importantly, these local, non-central models of civil society also represented a competing political line of equality-driven activism that drew on the emancipatory potential of "alternative socialism" and the Thaw-era discourses (interrupted or marginalized later on) of social justice and humanism. However, for these photographic collectives Perestroika's emancipatory, egalitarian, de-centralizing impulses and promises failed to materialize, and they themselves were soon marginalized and forgotten, largely eclipsed by Moscow- or Leningrad-based actors. This marginalization of alternative emancipating democratic socialism that came from the provinces, argues Musvik, helps explain both the memory-blocking of Perestroika's optimistic, proactive spirit and its ultimate failure in Russia.

In her paper "Grassroots Groups and Ambiguities of Perestroika in Leningrad" **Margarita Pavlova** (Justus Liebig University Giessen / Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam) explored the trajectories of grass-root activist groups in Leningrad, concerned with preservation of historical heritage and environmental protection, specifically, the Rescue Committee for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments. Whereas conventionally Perestroika is regarded as a period of expanding opportunities and freedoms, Pavlova complicates this perception by highlighting restrictive policies employed by various Soviet agencies to curb, control or undermine grass-root activism that the system rhetorically encouraged.

Leningrad's socio-cultural movement drew on the legacies of the city's pre-perestroika underground milieu formalized in 1981 as a semi-official literary association Club-81 (curated by the Fifth Chief Directorate of Leningrad KGB) and the legendary Leningrad *Saigon Café*, as both offered space (quite literally) to young creative misfits to exchange ideas and build independent community(ies). Various groups could thus interact with each other, learn and adopt new tactics and strategies from the previous generations of Leningrad dissenters, etc.

In late 1986, Leningrad Center for Creative Initiative was established by the Komsomol an expression of Perestroika policies geared towards the expansion of youth participation in public affairs albeit under close control of official structures, such as Komsomol and the KGB. The leaders of Leningrad grassroots groups consistently emphasized that they posed no challenge to communist ideology or the existing one-party system, insisted that their concerns were cultural rather than political and that they were simply taking Gorbachev at his word when he called on the public to play a more active role in civic affairs. Throughout 1987, as the scope of the grass-root movements' activities expanded to include street festivals, demonstrations and performances, Leningrad authorities adopted a range of *ad hoc* policies and regulations meant to limit public assemblies, which later spread to other Soviet cities. In mid-June 1987, a resolution on "Negative Manifestations in the Activities of Some Non-Formal Public Associations" was passed by the central party apparatus and was promoted by party committees, the Komsomol, and the KGB. It prescribed different degrees of pressure and various forms of "handling" to be used against grass-root groups depending on their perceived degree of loyalty to the regime. Besides legal restrictions on public assemblies, other effective counter-measures included discrediting propaganda, infiltration tactics and the creation of controlled organizations to undermine influential grass-root movements.

Karolina Koziura (European University Institute, Florence) studies the emergence of bottom up collective memory of *Holodomor* in Ukraine that goes back to the mid-1980s. He research draws on her interviews with local memory activists, ethnographic observations of different memorial sites in Central Ukraine and comprehensive media analysis of Soviet press that documented early commemorative efforts of the famine in Ukraine, published memoirs of survivors and so much more. The memorial sites became focal points around which local communities could come together around their shared feelings of loss and grief and a moral urge to seek historical justice.

Koziura's paper titled "*Holodomor* Unveiled: The Emergence of Grass-root Memory of Famine in Ukraine under Perestroika" is part of her current book project that traces the transnational production, circulation, and contestation of knowledge about the Great Ukrainian Famine from the 1930s till the present. She argues that Perestroika is a crucial moment for understanding the centrality of Holodomor for the politics of memory in Ukraine. Her focus on local communities and individual activists as agents in the production of memory and knowledge of the famine, and not merely passive recipients of imported historical narratives undermines a common misperception that the memory of Holodomor is a construct, imported from the diaspora and imposed top-down on Ukrainian society. It is these local communities and the commemorations they helped to establish, Koziura argues, that changed what was accepted as historical truth in the 1980s, marking the eventual democratization of public discourse and fuelling historical redress.

The second panel explored **"Perestroika as an Expression of Artistic Non-Conformism"**. Culture, of course, was one of the central venues on which citizens of the late-Soviet societies made sense of the past and of the unfolding changes, experimented with various forms of self-expression and activism, absorbed and translated foreign ideas, fashions and influences, communicated themselves to the world, and so much more. Rock music, in particular, was essentially legalized in the USSR at the time and enjoyed an extraordinary surge in popularity (facilitated by

television) all across Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, since it conveyed the deep-seated hopes, anxieties and desires of the listeners: the yearning for change, political freedoms, more agency and openness, sincerity and peace. It also allowed both musicians and fans from the Eastern and Western Blocs to experience a novel sense of togetherness and solidarity across the ideological divides and physical borders. The Moscow Music Peace Festival, for example, – a massive rock concert of six Soviet rock-bands and three western ones that took place on August 12-13, 1989 at what is now known as the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow – was attended by 100,000 people and televised to 59 countries around the world. It inspired one of the participating bands, the West German band *Scorpions*, to record their 1990/1 hit "Wind of Change", one of the best-selling singles of all times and a powerful symbol of the end of the Cold War. **Ondřej Daniel** (*Charles University*) talked about the March 1988 *Depeche Mode* concert in Prague ("Black Celebration in Red Prague: Concert of Depeche Mode in March 1988") that similarly marked a highly symbolic milestone in breaking down the cultural isolation of socialist Czechoslovakia that was more acutely experienced there than in the neighboring Hungary or Poland. While the music enthusiasts rejoiced at the arrival of the famous Western band, for the Czechoslovak communist regime, on the other hand, the concert served a much more pragmatic purpose. By allowing the British group to perform in Prague the Czechoslovak Communist Party sought to reach out and mend its relations with at least some segment of the disenchanted youth, especially since the band's focus on socio-political and environmental issues and critique of Western capitalism (which earned them the moniker of "red rockers") made its music and lyrics palatable to the authorities from the ideological point of view.

While music was one of the crucial outlets of socio-political critique at the time, non-conformist art was another, although a much less straightforward one. **Ilya Kalinin** (Humboldt University, Berlin) based his analysis of Perestroika's critical language on the deconstruction of the official Soviet discourse while drawing for illustration on the non-conformist art of the 1980s, specifically, the works of Komar and Melamid, Eric Bulatov, and Grisha Bruskin. In his paper titled "Universal (Non-/Anti-) Soviet Lexicon: Between Deconstruction and Affirmation", Kalinin showed how the very specific type of criticism of the Soviet characteristic of the late Soviet era, rooted in the stylistic and ideological techniques of Soviet Pop Art, Conceptualism and the everyday poetics of *stiob*, failed to make *the Soviet* insipid and sterile, but instead, contributed to its subsequent rehabilitation and reproduction (exemplified, famously, by Leonid Parfyonov's 1995 TV project "Old Songs about the Main Things.")

One is reminded here of Yurchak's discussion of *stiob*, that he defines as "a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor… [requiring] such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two."[1] Unlike Kalinin, Yurchak insists on a distinction between the aesthetics of *stiob* and the irony of Sots Art. The works of Bulatov, Bruskin, Prigov, etc. that illustrate Kalinin's thesis, ridiculed Soviet slogans and Soviet socialist visual clichés by decontextualizing them and mixing them with images from popular/consumer culture. The aesthetic of *stiob*, importantly, eschewed

[1] Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 250.

the idea of straightforward engagement with, allegiance to or criticism of anything, and shunned political and social concerns altogether as "uninteresting." This consciously nurtured ambivalence, the refusal to identify with a political position (which in itself, of course, is a fundamentally political gesture) and inability to articulate the political all rooted in the 1970s and 1980s, have ultimately produced a convenient cynical conformism, a kind of populist post-modernism in the post-Soviet period that proved helpless against (or, perhaps, even helped usher) the return of *the Soviet* in both its aesthetical and political dimensions.

Kateryna Yeremieieva (Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich) similarly based her paper "Without Words: The Speaking Process in Perestroika Caricatures" on the wealth of visual material that she found in the all-Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil* and its Ukrainian counterpart *Perets* and explored the ways in which both old Soviet practices of speaking and the new practices of *glasnost'* were portrayed, ridiculed and subverted in Perestroika caricatures. The complex socio-economic, cultural and discursive changes that were triggered by Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost',* Yeremieieva argued, could not keep pace with the enfolding transformations on the ground. The resultant "discursive lacunae", the discrepancy between slogans and actions, inspired Soviet caricaturists to problematize the performativity of these ritualistic speaking practices that failed to produce any new meanings or material sustenance. A typical image of the time is that of the horn of plenty, which spits out not desired products (food coveted at a time of worsening food shortages) but empty words. These words were often depicted as soap bubbles, colorful but ephemeral, or air balloons, keeping the rhetorically prolific officials afloat. Speakers in official suits were portrayed in the guise of fish that are allowed to open their mouths because of their official position, but can produce no sound. The new slogans, such as "Long Live!", "Glory to..!", "Down With…!", the ironic "Thank God!" morphed into empty, overly emotional clichés not much different from the Soviet classic "Glory to the Communist Party!", etc. By employing Salvatore Attardo's concept *of semiotic affordance*[2]– the assumption that different modes offer different potentials for making meaning – Yeremieieva analyzed Perestroika caricatures to trace discursive changes throughout the late Soviet period and explore various social phenomena, processes and emotions as they were captured by the artists working in the genre: food shortages, social tensions, the emergence of pluralism, the real and imaginary "West", frustration, impatience, hopefulness, disappointment and so much more.

The third panel, **"Perestroika as a Moral Debate"**, focused on the creation of new moral registers that accompanied the introduction of certain market elements into the socialist command economy. While socialist ethos celebrated modesty, asceticism and collectivism, ridiculed 'petty bourgeois' materialism and expected every citizen to prioritize public/collective interests over their selfish individualist concerns, the economic transformations challenged these seemingly stable moral coordinates. Entrepreneurs, who had been scolded, ridiculed and persecuted for most of the Soviet era, were now brought out of the shadows of the "Second" or "shadow" economy into the limelight, celebrated (however hesitantly) for their ingenuity and adaptability, and tasked with solving the country's enormous economic problems and eliminating its deficits.

[2] Salvatore Attardo, "The Role of Affordances at the Semantics/Pragmatics Boundary", *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, Volume 27 (2005), pp. 169-174.

Thus, the new economic and social realities prompted both party ideologues and societies at large to re-examine their value systems, from the understanding of social justice to the categories of "honest/honorable work", "earned/deserved income", "fair pay", "inequality", "public vs. private interest", etc. At the individual level, as some of the papers in the panel showed, Perestroika challenged citizens in socialist and post-socialist countries to redefine the meaning of "success" and to debate whether particular strategies for achieving it were morally justifiable and socially appropriate.

The process unfolded very differently in the USSR and in those socialist countries that retained certain market elements (small private property, small enterprises) and had lived with a planned economy for a much shorter period than the Soviet Union. Hungary, for example, introduced far-reaching economic reforms in the early 1980s, legalizing the so-called "Second Economy" – i.e. individual economic activity outside the state sector. **Annina Gagyiova** (Institute of History, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague) followed the career of a certain Budapest-based businesswoman who ran a small flower shop, in her paper "Moving From Risk to Risky: Hungary's Second Economy and it is Transition to Market after 1989." Although the woman had started her business well before the changes and enjoyed modest success, little in her experience had prepared her for the difficult transition from a state socialist command economy to a market economy, which ultimately led her to close her shop.

In "If Cooperatives Win – We All Win!": Discussions of Private Enterprise and Social Justice in the Soviet Union during Perestroika" **Anna Ivanova** (Humboldt University, Berlin) analyzed various reactions, both "from above" and "from below", to the introduction of cooperatives in 1988. While the initial goal was to satisfy consumer needs where planned economy consistently failed to do it, stimulate economic competitiveness and improve industrial efficiency (factories could sell unused stockpiles to cooperatives, which were expected to be more flexible and efficient in churning out much coveted consumer goods), it soon became clear that only a minority of cooperatives produced goods and services for the end consumers. The majority were busy siphoning off as much noncash funds as they could and transferring (plundering) factory or plant resources to private firms typically owned by the plant's directors.

Critics of the cooperatives that advocated for the introduction for more restrictions stressed that the new Soviet private entrepreneurs enriched themselves at the expense of public good and accused the reformers of promoting material inequality and encouraging selfish profiteering. They were, in turn, labeled as "dogmatists" who opposed progress and advocated "leveling." All in all, this new economic and social reality prompted the Soviet people to form their own opinions about unregulated free prices, unlimited profits, the relationship between the amount of labor invested and the profit made, and even led some to give more credence to socialist ideas in the face of growing inequalities and perceived social injustices.

Matej Ivančík (Comenius University, Bratislava) explored the relationship between democratic transformation and the discourse of morality rooted in the economic thought. In his paper titled "Markets in the Name of Morality. Economic Thought and Democracy in Post-Socialist Slovakia" Ivančík analyzed this very distinct discourse articulated through marketization that emerged in Slovakia in the 1980s and was shaped by a flurry of publications and campaigns seeking to provide the necessary

expertise for effective economic transformation. This expert discourse, argues Ivančík, went beyond entrepreneurial self-entitlement and posited individuals who were willing to take risks and take the initiative in the nascent market economy as key actors shaping the emerging democratic society. He also highlighted the prolonged continuity of this discourse, which makes Slovak case particularly interesting. It lasted well into the 1990s, eventually solidifying into an inalienable component of the moral underpinnings of liberal democracy, with the liberal democrats, as well as professional economists and sociologists playing a pivotal role in articulating criticisms of Vladimir Mečiar's authoritarian government.

Jogilė Ulinskaitė (Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University) started her presentation by reminding the audience that "Perestroika" was not really the term much used in Lithuania. Her paper "Negotiated and Justified Stories About the Post-Communist Transformation in Lithuania" was based on the wealth of oral history interviews with entrepreneurs who launched their business ventures in the late 1980-90s, and with those who chose to stay in the industrial sector in the 1990s Lithuania. The interviews were conducted in 2021 and 2023 in the country's two industrial cities: Panevėžys and Jonava. Ulinskaitė drew on Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's theory of justification (elaborated in their 1991 book *On Justification: Economies of Worth*) "to explain how different people actively engage[d] in social discourses and [drew] social boundaries to determine the legitimacy and value of their actions and choices in their professional careers." Boltanski is closely associated with the rise of so-called "moral sociology", and Ulinskaitė's own research brings together cultural sociology and sociology of emotions. Boltanski and Thévenot identified six "orders of worth"[3] or "economies of worth" (domestic, civic, market, industrial, inspired, fame) – i.e. universal repertoire of systematic and cohesive principles that people use to make, evaluate and criticize decisions and choices and that govern political, economic and social relationships while coexisting in the same social space. Ulinskaitė analyzed specific *orders of worth* that her respondents from two distinct groups used to explain their choices and explained how these repertoires of evaluation were used differently by different groups. Small entrepreneurs, the agents of new economic and social relations, were still widely regarded with suspicion and even disparagingly, as a group that needs to be regulated and monitored. In contrast, industrial workers that used to be the backbone of the Soviet planned economy and enjoyed considerable social prestige, began to lose relevance with the onset of privatization and introduction of capitalist efficiency requirements. By evoking values of hard work, resourcefulness and agility to explain and justify their professional and personal trajectories Ulinskaitė's respondents participated in the cultural constructions of achievement/success, pride, and ethnic belonging and reflect a complex interaction among different values of the past and the present.

[3] Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, transl.by Catherine Potter (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1991).

DAY TWO

The second day of the workshop opened with a panel titled **"Perestroika as a Transnational Event"** that expanded the geographic scope of the discussion to explore the various global cultural influences that travelled across Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia at the time and to trace Perestroika's mutual effects on both sides of the Berlin Wall. Importantly, Perestroika was the time of extensive border crossings and ofvarious cultural and professional exchanges and encounters between the citizens of the socialist camp who could finally travel abroad more easily, and foreigners – scholars, journalists, culture-makers, peace activists, politicians and ordinary people – who visited the region both in their professional or official capacity and as tourists.

Kirsten Bönker (University of Cologne) talked about the popular practice of town twinning as a form of rapprochement and new openness that was proposed by the Soviets as a new foreign policy strategy during Perestroika. In "Building a "Common European Home"? Town Twinning between Soviet, West and East German Cities during Perestroika" Bönker demonstrated how contacts with Western German cities and towns (in contrast to twinning practices involving other Warsaw Pact states) eroded the ideological framework in which the Soviet people were conventionally expected to act and communicate with their Western counterparts. Youth travel, tourism, cultural exchanges and a variety of other town twinning practices reveal how people understood and experienced Perestroika from below, how they performed their national identity in the changing political conditions and how they envisaged Europe as a shared continent and a "common home."

Tetiana Perga's (Institute of World History, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine / Heidelberg University) paper titled "External Factor": The Role of the Diaspora in the Development of the Environmental Movement in Ukraine during the Period of Perestroika" also described an encounter of sorts between Soviet and Western citizens. The Chernobyl disaster gave a powerful impetus to the development of environmental movement in Ukraine that encompassed intellectuals, scientists, environmental groups and private citizens. However, there was another important group that contributed to the rise of the movement, which is usually omitted from the scholarship: Ukrainian diaspora in North America. It is widely believed, that the diaspora was primarily interested in the issues pertaining to the national-liberation movement. However, in the Ukrainian context the nationalist and environmentalist agendas were closely intertwined, since Ukraine's national independence was widely regarded as a prerequisite for solving its ecological problems and to "healing its environment." Diaspora activists in the US, Canada, England and Germany engaged in political lobbying and staged anti-Soviet demonstrations demanding that their governments and the UN International Court of Justice in the Hague determine Moscow's responsibility for Chernobyl. They also collected information pertaining to the disaster, launched fund-raising campaigns to help the affected areas, established contacts between western doctors and their Ukrainian counterparts to help send the necessary medical supplies, equip the hospitals, share expertise, and much more. Diaspora environmental organizations, most notably, the Committee for Environmental Concerns in Ukraine (CECU) and the ECOLOS (both founded in Toronto in 1988 and 1989 respectively) conscripted western scientists and environmental experts to elaborate reports and recommendations on the

environmental situation in Ukraine, helped establish green organizations in Ukraine and played a crucial role in promoting them in the West. On invitation of their diaspora counterparts, Ukrainian environmentalists could travel to the West where they were introduced to decision-makers and the general public in these countries: business leaders, politicians, civil society activists and sympathetic citizens. As a result of these encounters and exchanges, Perga argued, many international organizations could open their offices in Ukraine and contributed to the implementation of a wide range of environmental and human rights projects.

Emma Friedlander (Harvard University) is writing her doctoral dissertation on alternative spirituality and the paranormal in the USSR. The title of her paper "The Soviet New Age: A Pop Culture Chronology of Soviet Collapse, 1975-2000" suggested a much more extended chronology of the Soviet collapse, that stretched from the 1970-s through the new millennium. "Collapse" is another useful addition to the revisited vocabulary of Perestroika terms, argued Friedlander, but it should be understood not as a moment of rupture, but as a prolonged multi-directional process. Friedlander also brought a comparative perspective to the discussion of alternative spirituality by comparing case studies from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia and, broader, by situating the Soviet New Age within the global processes of late twentieth century postmodernity. She looked at the popular attraction to and experimentation with the paranormal as a means of telling a more nuanced story of the lived experience of Perestroika, with a particular focus on local specificities and continuities, as well as the groups most associated with the phenomenon, such as women (widely believed to form the bulk of Soviet followers of the mostly male gurus such as Chumak or Kashpirovsky, and mercilessly ridiculed for their perceived credulity) and the lower to middle classes. The comparative transnational perspective and the use of anthropological research methodology should ultimately help Friedlander to detect the specifically *Soviet* elements in the Soviet fascination with the paranormal and offer a lot of important insights into the late Soviet culture. Given the extended chronology of Friedlander's study, it would be interesting to see in her further research how the Soviet New Age shaped sensitivities, sensibilities and politics throughout the post-Soviet era, how it influenced the subsequent rise of conspiracy thinking, the spread of Ponzi schemes (e.g. the MMM financial pyramid, etc.) and the infiltration of mystical thinking into mainstream politics (Aleksandr Dugin, etc.).

The next panel **"Perestroika Outside Time and Place"** invited for a reflection of the particular temporalities and spatial relations engendered by this process of restructuring as the speakers variously attempted to revisit conventional periodization of Perestroika, looking beyond its nominally established boundaries (1986-1991) and focusing on experiential continuities and long(er) processes, rather than ruptures and isolated events.

Isaac Scarborough (Institute for History, Leiden University) has lived, worked in and written about Tajikistan, focusing on modern Central Asian politics, agricultural monocultures, political mobilization and post-Soviet economic development. His presentation "Perestroika Did Not End – Perestroika is Ongoing: The Extended Reform and Collapse of the USSR across the Soviet Divide" similarly built on the intertwined case studies of Tajikistan and Russia to propose a theoretical re-conceptualization of Perestroika that violates existing historical definitions of

political, social and economic change. Instead of treating Perestroika as a formally bounded period, Scarborough approaches it as lived experience of time or, rather, streams of experience: an era of change, degradation, social disorder and, in many cases (including Tajikistan), ultimately violence, which started and ended earlier or later for different societies. Using a variety of historiographical sources (archives, memoirs, contemporary periodicals, and interviews) from the 1980s and 1990s, he argues that the fundamental struggle of Perestroika – to reform and modernize the Soviet economy and polity – would continue to play out in Tajikistan throughout the 2000s, with fundamental questions of marketization, social order and political rule still unresolved and ambiguous.

Tamar Qeburia (Georg-August University Göttingen / Ilia State University) is currently completing her doctoral dissertation on the social, material, and labor history of Soviet industrialization in the Georgian SSR, focusing specifically on the history of the Zestafoni Ferroalloy Factory (ZFF), the country's leading plant for manganese smelting. In her paper "Pre-Perestroika Dynamics in a Georgian Factory" she similarly sought to expand the chronological boundaries of the late-Soviet transformation. Qeburia argued against the prevailing perception of the 1970-s and early 1980s as a period of stagnation and instead, offered a more nuanced interpretation of this period that set the stage for the shift that followed in the late 1980s. She used Oushakine's definition of the Soviet economy of this period as an "economy of storage"[4] as opposed to the traditional perception of it as an "economy of shortage", and described excessive stock-piling, over-production and accumulation of unnecessary materials and goods at the ZFF.

The town of Zestafoni, in which ZFF was built in 1934, was initially conceived of as a "city-laboratory," a testimony to the success of Soviet industrialization. However, by the 1970s, changes in the Soviet political and economic agenda, notably the prioritization of light and chemical industry over heavy industry, had weakened the role and status of the Soviet giant factories, like ZFF, forcing an array factory-affiliated actors (scientists, managers, factory-based engineers, technologists and metallurgists) to actively seek new ways to revamp industrial production and devise novel strategies to address soaring industrial pollution levels, declining production rates, and increasingly harsh working conditions.

In the early 1980s – i.e. on the cusp of "Pre-Perestroika", the efforts of these enthusiasts were galvanized into a movement tellingly called "*Perestraivat*'" (Rus.: "to rebuild, to reconstruct"), whose activities were chronicled in a 1981 archival documentary movie *Rekonstruktsia* (Rus.: "reconstruction"). Drawing on this footage, as well as numerous oral testimonies, archival sources and photographs, Qeburia discussed the role of industrial factories as mirrors of broader economic and social transformations and instabilities, but also as spaces of experimentation with one's agency and initiative "from within" and "from below."

Finally, **Isabel Jacobs** (Queen Mary University of London) and **Katerina Pavlidi** (University College Dublin) offered, perhaps, the most theoretically sophisticated attempt at problematizing late Soviet perceptions of time and especially of the future,

[4] Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "Against the Cult of Things": On Soviet Productivism, Storage Economy, and Commodities with No Destination", *The Russian Review* 73 (April 2014): 198–236.

and tackling the conventional mythologies associated with them. Their jointly presented paper "Perestroika as Return: Late Soviet Temporalities and the Myth of Stagnation" can be better understood as a new conceptual toolkit to describe complex, non-linear temporalities, that grew out of the research network "Late Soviet Temporalities" that Jacobs and Pavlidi launched in 2022.

They began by challenging the prevailing perception of the years preceding Perestroika as ones of 'stagnation', characterized by a sense (widely shared by Soviet citizens) of being stuck inside an immutable system, living in an eternal present (what Yurchak famously described as "everything was forever.") Corollary to it is a no less common view of Perestroika as a radical point of discontinuity marked by a dramatic acceleration of time. However, a closer look at the thriving underground communities and intellectual milieu of the 1970s-1980s, the artistic expressions that circulated through *samizdat*, Necrorealist films, essays by Boris Groys, Valentin Silvestrov's music, Yevgeny Yufit's photo and film works, the Yuzhinsky Circle (or Yuri Mamleev Salon) and beyond, refutes these perceptions, suggesting instead a coexistence or simultaneity of presentist and progressive temporal regimes and a panoply of ways in which these underground intellectuals and artists experienced, conceptualized and made sense of the time, history and different kinds of periodization. The creative and intellectual output of these individuals and groups, argued Jacobs and Pavlidi, yield a new understanding of the very notion of change, freed from its modernist future-oriented optimistic connotations, which now also signified "a return to pre-modern modes of being and feeling, religious and mystical at their very core." Their artistic works and writing can also enrich our temporal vocabulary of Perestroika(s) and the various other temporal transformations in late Soviet society with more nuanced terms beyond the worn-out "stagnation" and "change", such as "impermanence", "circularity", "transience", "emptiness", "repetition", "ritual" and "liminality", this latter with a nod to Victor Turner's 1969 study that analyzed temporary suspension of semiotic activity, suspension of signs that lose their primary meaning, characteristic of liminal personae.[5]

Jacobs and Pavlidi argued that Perestroika as a historical period can be described both as a pivotal point of discontinuity and the "continuation in a long dureé of Soviet temporalities that not only anticipated but also shaped the nature of change and the conception of the future that Perestroika proposed." They suggested that it was also a process of historical *inversion* – much like the Thaw and Khruschev's incomplete attempts at destalinization, Perestroika promised a return to the purer, idealized past, to the earlier, Leninist revolutionary ideals, untainted by the later day abuses and excesses. And since the future promised by Gorbachev resided in an idealized past, argued Jacobs and Pavlidi, Perestroika can be seen as a mythological project, "grounded in extra-temporal and hence perennial values."

The final panel of the workshop explored the intellectual **"Perestroika of the mind"** and addressed various perceptions of what anthropologist Caroline Humphrey in her eponymous book called "the unmaking of Soviet life"[6] by various social groups and their reactions to the shocks inherent in the transition to free market, *glasnost'* and

[5] Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas", in The *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction Press, 2008), 358-374.
[6] Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002)

democracy. **Hubert Guzik** (Czech Technical University, Prague) discussed opinion polls conducted in Poland and Czechoslovakia concerning mass housing construction, architecture, and environmental issues to answer the question posed in the title of his paper: "What Can Historians of Perestroika Learn from Opinion Polls?" The publication of selected poll results, Guzik suggested, can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to influence popular opinion. These surveys revealed a marked difference in the attitudes to reforms between the blue-collar and white-collar workers, which sociologists in the late 1980s explained by a greater public awareness of the cultural impact of *glasnost'* compared with the political and economic effects of *uskorenie*.

Courtney Doucette (State University of New York, Oswego) presented a broader book manuscript titled "Perestroika: The Last Attempt to Create the New Soviet Person", in which she proposes to consider the Gorbachev period not as a move away from the earlier Soviet practices – a perspective endorsed by Stephen Kotkin, Archie Brown or Stephen Cohen, among others – but as a last ditch attempt to realize the Soviet ideal of the New Person. Doucette argues, that Gorbachev and other reformers imagined that the new policies they introduced in economics, politics and the social sphere would finally provide the necessary conditions to unleash the hidden potential of each Soviet citizen and would ultimately make Soviet society the finest collectivity on earth.

In addition to reversing the conventional interpretive paradigm that tells the story of Perestroika from the collapse of the Soviet Union backwards, Doucette focuses her story not on the major political figures in Gorbachev's entourage, but on ordinary citizens. She suggests that the popular practice of letter-writing, especially of writing public letters addressed to the editors of major publications or written in response to specific articles or public discussions, constitutes an important genre of the period that helped people to engage with the key concepts and categories that animated the reform, while participating in politics and forging themselves as active citizens.

KEYNOTE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION **"How to Speak About Perestroika Now?"** moderated by **Bradley Gorski** (Georgetown University)

Participants of the roundtable discussion began by discussing various theoretical terms that unlocked Perestroika for their own research as well as those that they thought need to be abandoned, and then moved on to deconstruct standard orthodoxies in historiography that they had to overcome about this period and to suggest their own definitions of what the lived experience of Perestroika was like.

For postcolonial/decolonial scholar **Epp Annus** (Tallinn University / Ohio State University) who spoke about the Estonian perspective, Perestroika was above all a moment of decolonization, a response to the yet another russification campaign across the USSR launched in 1978 and that Estonians regarded as an existential threat. Another important term for her is "post-modernism" with its incredulity towards grand ideological narratives and the very idea of progress that people now openly laughed about. Perestroika was also a period of nation building for Estonia – a yet another useful lens – when important culture-makers established themselves as ironic post-modern figures, some of whom were not convinced by the ideas of a market future for their country and debated possible alternatives. **Stefanie Eisenhuth** (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam) who studies GDR-specific

beauty culture, dismissed as misleading the notion of "reunification", the Cold War idea of two entities artificially separated coming together again. Instead, she prefers to think of Perestroika in GDR – this term was not used in East Germany – as a long history of *die Wende*: the German word that loosely means "turning point" or change" around the fall of the Berlin Wall. To East Germans, she notes, *die Wende* also meant an experience of "moving" to a different country without actually going anywhere. For **Juliane Fürst** (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam) who is currently working on a book project on the emotional history of Perestroika, the key term is, of course, "emotions": how they were subverted, experienced, and submerged, and what kind of affective communities were formed around pride, grief, trauma, etc., potentially serving as useful alternatives to the worn-out categories of "nationalists," "liberals," "monarchists," "revanchists" and so on, that organize much of Perestroika research. Finally, **Veronika Pehe** (Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague), a cultural historian of economic change who recently co-edited (with Joanna Wawrzyniak) a volume titled *Remembering the Neoliberal Turn: Economic Change and Collective Memory in Eastern Europe after 1989*[7], chose "inequality" as an operative term, but also agreed that a lot of personal memories and narratives about the period as analyzed in this volume, were highly charged with various emotions, not least because the transition to capitalism as a system based on inequality was inherently bound to produce a strong emotional response.

As for the terms that need to be abandoned and the historiographic conventions that have to be overcome, Juliane Fürst admitted to having a strong aversion to the term "neo-liberal" that has become so negatively charged as to almost offer an apology for the Soviet system. She also argued against the common perception of Perestroika as a failure and rupture, suggesting instead a closer look at the subtler processes, continuities, and the hollowing-out of earlier ideas, social norms, and forms of behavior that were reinvented as they were imported into the future. Similarly, Stefanie Eisenhuth spoke of the need to focus on continuities when talking about the history of the GDR. Today's rise of non-democratic parties in the former East Germany, she argued, and the markedly different attitudes toward Russian aggression against Ukraine recorded by pollsters there and in the western part of the country, testify to the durability of the GDR's sovietization on the cultural level, a largely understudied topic in historiography. She was also not so sure about the usefulness of the term "transformation" because it implies that something has a fixed starting point and an end result, whereas the period was very much about openness and open-endedness. Moreover, she argued, *die Wende* was not only the end of something, but also the beginning. Veronika Pehe agreed with the importance of being sensitive to alternative periodizations – something that ran through many papers and discussions in the course of the two days, – and added, that it should be nuanced enough to accommodate not only different national cases but also different social groups in various countries. For example, industrial workers might have seen the privatization of their factory as the defining moment of the period, while for the military their withdrawal from Afghanistan might have been more important, for others still it was the proclaimed policy of *glasnost*, or the release of political prisoners, etc., in short, events with very different emotional connotations. The Baltic countries, for example, Epp Annus remarked, can hardly relate to the idea of "selective amnesia about the

[7] Veronika Pehe, Joanna Wawrzyniak (eds.), *Remembering the Neoliberal Turn: Economic Change and Collective Memory in Eastern Europe after 1989* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

positive collective feelings of Perestroika", that spurred Victoria Musvik's research, but would much rather remember it as a period of collective euphoria, of togetherness, of holding hands and singing – quite literally, as in the singing revolution (1987-1991) and the Baltic Way/Chain (1989).

Finally, what was Perestroika like for those who lived through it? Is there an image or a concept that captures it?

Matěj Spurný (*Institute of Economic and Social History, Charles University, Prague)* proposed the term "authenticity", which has resurfaced many times throughout the workshop in many a panel discussion: the juxtaposition of the earlier Soviet modality of *stiob* and quiet sabotage with the sudden if short-lived onset of sincerity and idealism in the late 1980s, the desire to finally put together the signifier and the signified. The question however, that Juliane Fürst asked in an earlier panel discussion, referring to Yuri Slezkine controversial article "Laughter in the Dark", in which Slezkine argued that the Soviet regime had laughed itself out of existence ("laughed itself sick and died in stitches")[8], is where has the earlier sincerity, that goes back to the Thaw disappeared? Had everything *really* become hollowed out by 1986?

Juliane Fürst also mentioned "graphomania" to describe the prolific outpouring of letter writing to so-called "thick" literary magazines and newspapers, in which many Soviet citizens from all walks of life, who had been taught to write and value the written word, have *en masse* put these competences to ample use. They enthusiastically engaged in the discussion of the Soviet past and shared their ideas about the nature of the changes they were witnessing. New dictionaries of terms pertaining to market economy, Perestroika, art or sexuality are published. People thought about language, valued it and wanted to make sense of, explore and structure their new realities.

Many participants spoke of the globalizing aspect of Perestroika: a massive influx of foreigners suddenly visiting the countries of Eastern bloc as well as facilitated travel to "the West" from the East of the continent, not to mention a huge wave of emigration from the USSR, particularly to Germany, Israel and the USA, that was not specifically addressed during the but which is a yet another manifestation of heightened geographic mobility that characterized the period. For millions of people on both sides of the Iron Curtain, terrorized for decades by promises of impeding nuclear apocalypses, Perestroika was also about an intense desire for peace both at the official and grass-root level – a topic of **Irina Gordeeva**'s research (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam). **Corinna Kuhr-Korolev** (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam) spoke about the sheer pace of the many-vectored processes all happening at the same time at break-neck speed, which was extraordinary in and of itself. Perhaps, she suggested, the difficulty of piecing together a single narrative of Perestroika (not that we need just one) can be explained by how incredibly eventful and fast-paced this short period was, with *uskorenie* (Gorbachev's acceleration policy) becoming part of the crisis itself. **Kelly Smith** (*Georgetown University*) discussed the term "flux" to remind us that Perestroika also meant opportunity that was used by some people, and that there were also those who

[8] Yuri Slezkine, "Laughter in the Dark", *Ab Imperio*, 4/2023, pp. 95-100.

lacked such an active agency in the events and to whom things mostly happened. Finally, **Bradley Gorski** (Georgetown University) and Juliane Fürst came up with two rather poetic images to capture the essence of Perestroika: the Borgesian “garden of forking paths”, that some of which were not taken, and “free fall with gravity suspended” that beautifully conveys the at once terrifying, impossible and exhilarating time that it was. And with that the workshop was adjourned.