

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

COMMUNIST PARTIES REVISITED

Socio-Cultural Approaches to Party Rule
in the Soviet Bloc, 1956–1991

POTSDAM, DECEMBER 5–7, 2013

The communist ruling parties (CPs) of Eastern and East Central Europe after 1945 can be considered to be the most effective political organizations of the 20th century. They claimed to put utopian societal models into practice, determined their million members' biographies and efficiently bound them to their basic organizations – despite their erosion and demise in the late 1980s. Although there is no question about their societal and cultural shaping power, recent historiography is still dominated by classic narratives of political history. CPs are mainly interpreted as isolated, monolithic power machines.

In contrast, it is this conference's aim to re-interpret the highly normative party life and the CPs' power-securing practice at all levels. Analyses of the party organizations' inner workings will shed light onto the 'closed society' of the CP as well as gain insights into the logic of the party leaderships and their apparatuses' actions; the social composition of the membership; and their value systems. In addition, there is the question of the mid-level party functionaries' room for maneuver which should open up new perspectives on Soviet-style political systems. Further questions to be discussed include the parties' local social practice and the efficacy of the CPs' ability to endow meaning on party membership through rituals and ideology.

The main aim of this conference is to develop a comparative perspective that can be implemented across the broad spectrum of Eastern Bloc CPs. The conference will focus predominantly on the East German SED, the CPSU and the Polish United Workers' Party.

Conveners:

Dr. Jens Gieseke

Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam

Dr. Rüdiger Bergien

Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam

Image: SED district conference delegates in the event hall of the steel mill in Brandenburg/Havel, January 1984; © Stadtmuseum Brandenburg an der Havel

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SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACHES TO PARTY RULE IN THE SOVIET BLOC, 1956–1991



CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY
HISTORY POTSDAM

Institute of the Leibniz Association



WITH SUPPORT OF

Fritz Thyssen Stiftung
für Wissenschaftsförderung



Closing Conference of the Potsdam Project
on the East German SED – Social History of a
Soviet-Style Communist Party, 1961–1989

December 5–7, 2013

Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam

PROGRAM

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5

14.30 REGISTRATION

15.15–15.30 WELCOME

15.30–17.15 **Rüdiger Bergien, Potsdam:** From Stalinist Bulwark to Mediation Agency? The SED's Central Party Bureaucracy after 1956
Christoph Boyer, Salzburg: Communist Party Apparatuses as Steering Organizations. Paths of Development in East Central Europe

Discussant: **Dariusz Stola, Warsaw**

17.30–18.30 SNACK (Building Am Neuen Markt 9 d)

19.00–21.00 **PUBLIC LECTURE** (in German)

Jens Gieseke, Potsdam: Die SED – Staatspartei in der ostdeutschen Gesellschaft. Fragen und Befunde eines soziokulturellen Zugriffs

DISCUSSION

Moderator: **Frank Bösch, Potsdam**

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6

9.00–10.45 **PANEL 2: MECHANISMS OF POWER AND 'INFORMAL RULE'**

Andrea Bahr, Potsdam: Paternalism in Local Practice: Logics of Repression, Ideological Hegemony and Everyday Management of Society in a SED District Secretariat
Krzysztof Dąbek, Warsaw: PZPR – Polish United Workers' Party in Retrospective. Mechanisms of a Totalitarian Regime

Discussant: **Jay Rowell, Strasbourg**

10.45–11.15 COFFEE BREAK

11.15–13.00 **PANEL 3: GRASSROOTS PARTY LIFE – PRACTICES OF THE EVERYDAY**

Sabine Pannen, Potsdam: Behind Closed Doors. Erosion of SED Party-Life in the 1980s
Edward Cohn, Grinnell: The Paradox of Khrushchev-Era Party Discipline in the Soviet Communist Party

Discussant: **TBA**

13.00–14.30 LUNCH BREAK

14.30–16.15 **PANEL 4: SELF-PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL COMPOSITION**

Jens Gieseke, Potsdam: What Did the Comrades Think? SED Membership in Secret Opinion Polls and Police Reports
Michel Christian, Geneva: "It Is Not Possible to Allow Past Mistakes to Come Again", Recruiting Policy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia between 1968 and 1989

Discussant: **Thomas Lindenberger, Potsdam**

16.15–16.45 COFFEE BREAK

16.45–18.30 **PANEL 5: PARTY LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP STYLES**

Martin Sabrow, Potsdam: Erich Honecker – the 'Leading Representative', a Generational Perspective
Mark Kramer, Cambridge: Communication and Decision Processes in and amongst the Eastern Bloc's Communist Party Leaderships

Discussant: **Jürgen Danyel, Potsdam**

19.00 DINNER
(at "Zum Fliegenden Holländer",
Benkertstraße 5, 14467 Potsdam)

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7

9.00–10.45 **PANEL 6: DECLINE, DOWNFALL, TRANSFORMATION**

Frédéric Zalewski, Paris: On the Way to Party Pluralism? The PZPR and the Reform of the Socialist Party System in 1988–1989
Jan C. Behrends, Potsdam: What Is to Be Done? Gorbachev's Komanda and the End of Communism in the USSR

Discussant: **TBA**

10.45–11.15 COFFEE BREAK

11.15–12.30 **CONFERENCE RESUME: OLD PARTIES, NEW PERSPECTIVES?**

Panelists
Mark Kramer, Cambridge
Padraic Kenney, Bloomington

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

SNACK (Building Am Neuen Markt 9 d)



VENUE:

Haus der Brandenburgisch-Preußischen Geschichte
Lecture Hall
Am Neuen Markt 9 | 14467 Potsdam

Please register before November 21, 2013,
by sending an email to: karmann@zzf-pdm.de