

## **CFP: New Approaches to the History of the Jews under Communism**

Conference venue: Prague, Villa Lanna

Organizers: Kateřina Čapková, Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences; Kamil Kijek, Department of Jewish Studies, University of Wrocław; Stephan Stach, Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences

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Deadline: 31.10.2016

The experience of the Jews under the Communist régimes of east-central and eastern Europe has been a hotly debated topic of historiography since the 1950s. Until the 1980s, Cold War propaganda exerted a powerful influence on most interpretations presented in articles and books published on both sides of the 'Iron Curtain'. Moreover, most works focused both on the relationship between the régime and the Jews living under it and on the role of the Jews in the Communist/Socialist movements and the political events connected with the rise of antisemitism and emigration.

Even after the collapse of these Communist régimes, the political history and diplomatic relations between the Socialist states and the State of Israel remained the dominant topics in research on the Jews of the formerly Communist societies. Only in the last ten years or so can we observe a turn towards more complex views of Jewish experience under Communist régimes. The most inspiring and ground-breaking research done so far seems to have been especially in the area of the Jewish experience of the different parts of the former Soviet Union. One of the aims of our conference is therefore to start a dialogue between scholars focused on the Jews of the Soviet Union and those working on Jewish history in the pro-Soviet regimes of east-central and eastern Europe, because there has been, for various reasons, little cooperation between these two groups of scholars, even though their topics are interconnected.

Another aim of the conference is to provide junior scholars from Europe, especially those who come from east-central and eastern Europe, with a forum in which to discuss their research projects with top experts in the field. Many of the history departments at universities in the post-Communist region still focus on political history and adhere to the master narrative of the dominant nation. The history of the Jews under Communism is, in this context, often analysed from the perspective of the perceived (dis)loyalties of the Jews, and the highly politicized question of Jewish involvement in the Communist movement also remains dominant. All the more, then, is there a need for intense debates about new approaches and methodology free from nationalism and ideology.

Several key perspectives, we think, could help us to achieve a better understanding of the complexity of Jewish experience under the Communist régimes and thus also of the various Communist régimes and regions.

First of all, we are especially interested in contributions focused on the everyday life of the Jews, Jewish religious and secular organizations, and the possibilities of 'being Jewish' under the Communist régimes, which are also matters related to the legal position of the Jewish communities. Comparisons of the situations in the several countries of east-central and eastern Europe will, we believe, reveal many differences in the legal, religious, cultural, and linguistic circumstances of the Jews in the individual countries and regions. Obviously, the Jews of the Eastern bloc had no single way to express their Jewishness; there is no one particular pattern. Especially when it comes to the institutional and legal setting, the historian needs to ask to what extent the differences resulted from the diverse history of Jewish social and political life before the Communist takeovers. In other words, we also want to hear scholars address the question of the extent to which the Communist dictatorships brought change or totally new forms to Jewish institutions and activities, and also to what extent we may find continuity with Jewish life from the period before the takeovers and before the Shoah.

Second, scholars in this field mostly concentrate on the Jewish cultural and political elites in the Communist societies and therefore also on the Jews in the large cities, often the capitals. Though there is clearly a need for more research of this kind, we particularly welcome contributions that emphasize the experience of the Jews on the periphery and also Jews who did not succeed in becoming part of the elite or did not even wish to do so. This shift in perspective might well show, among other things, that the supposed religious and national assimilation and also atomization of Jewish society under a Communist régime was not as predominant as it has been claimed to be in the earlier historiography. As the research of Jeffrey Veidlinger, Gennady Estraiikh, Arkadi Zeltser, Elissa Bemporad, and Valeri Dymshits suggests, Jews on the geographic or social periphery in the different parts of the Soviet Union deep in the Communist period were preserving and developing Jewish religious traditions and Yiddish culture. Research on similar topics for the countries of east-central Europe largely remains to be done.

Third, as the path-breaking work of Anna Shternshis shows, even if we consider the official Communist propaganda for and about the Jews, we must be careful to separate the intentions of the propaganda writers from how the propaganda was perceived and creatively transformed by the Jews. Among the questions of interest to us is how the official anti-fascist ideology was perceived by the Jewish communities and by individual Jews. What about the state-sponsored Yiddish publishing houses and journals which were often seen as providing unique opportunities for Yiddish journalists and writers, while, however, demanding their loyalty to the socialist State?

Fourth, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, consciousness of world-wide connections between Jewish communities, families, and individuals increased and

several international Jewish institutions were established. When, how, and to what extent did Communism attack this aspect of Jewish life, which was one of most important in the Jewish modernization process? How did the Jews try to negotiate and preserve the particular modes of their transnationalism during the Cold War and East-West political divisions?

The following topics are for us of particular importance:

1. The legal positions of the Jews of the Communist/Socialist countries of Europe and the institutional opportunities for the Jews there (including religious, cultural, educational, and charitable institutions).
2. The ways of preserving and developing 'Jewishness' under the Communist regimes, within and outside the official organizations, in private and in public.
3. Family and gender aspects of Jewish life under Communism.
4. Networks across the 'Iron Curtain' and across the state borders in the 'Soviet bloc'.
5. Yiddish culture and education under the Communist régimes.

Among the scholars who have already agreed to participate in the conference are:

Elissa Bemporad, Queens College, New York

Valeri Dymshits, European University at St. Petersburg

Gennady Estraikh, New York University

Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, Polish Academy of Science, Warsaw

Marcos Silber, University of Haifa

Anna Shternshis, Toronto University

Arkadi Zeltser, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem

The conference will take place at Villa Lanna (<http://www.vila-lanna.cz/index.html>), Prague, from 23 to 25 May 2017. We are planning to publish an edited English-language volume of selected papers.

Thanks to generous funding from the European Association of Jewish Studies, the Institute of Contemporary History (of the Czech Academy of Sciences) Prague, and CEFRES, Prague, we are able to offer accommodation and meals for all the conference participants. Limited travel subventions will be available for some scholars.

Please send a longish abstract (1,000 words) of your research project (including footnotes) and a short bio by the end of October 2016 to all the conference organizers: capkova@usd.cas.cz, kamil.kijek@gmail.com, stach@usd.cas.cz. We encourage junior scholars from Europe to apply. The results will be announced by the end of November 2016.

## Call for papers: Nové přístupy k dějinám Židů za komunismu

Zkušenost Židů za komunistických režimů ve středovýchodní a východní Evropě byla vášnivě debatovaným tématem v historiografii již od padesátých let. I po kolapsu komunistických režimů dominují ve výzkumu historie Židů v komunistických společnostech politické dějiny a dějiny diplomatických vztahů mezi socialistickými státy a Izraelem. Až teprve v posledních zhruba deseti letech můžeme pozorovat obrat ke komplexnějšímu pohledu na židovskou zkušenost za komunistických režimů. Nejinspirativnější výzkum existuje, zdá se, především k židovské zkušenosti v rozdílných částech bývalého Sovětského svazu. Jedním z cílů naší konference je tedy začít dialog mezi vědci, kteří se zaměřují na Židy v Sovětském svazu, a těmi, kteří se zabývají Židy v pro-sovětských režimech středovýchodní a východní Evropy, protože zde, z různých důvodů, existuje jen velmi málo kooperace, i když jejich témata jsou navzájem provázaná.

Následující témata jsou pro nás obzvláště důležitá:

1. legislativa ohledně Židů v komunistických/socialistických státech Evropy a instituční možnosti pro Židy (včetně náboženských, kulturních, vzdělávacích a charitativních institucí),
2. způsoby udržování a rozvíjení „židovské identity“ za komunistických režimů, v rámci a mimo oficiální organizace, v soukromí i na veřejnosti,
3. rodinné a gender aspekty židovského života za komunismu,
4. sociální sítě přes „železnou oponu“ a napříč státy „sovětského bloku“,
5. jidiš kultura a vzdělávání v komunistických režimech

Mezi vědci, kteří již přislíbili svoji účast, jsou:

Elissa Bemporad, Queens College, New York

Valeri Dymshits, European University, St. Petersburg

Gennady Estraiikh, New York University

Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, Polská akademie věd, Varšava

Marcos Silber, Univerzita v Haifě

Anna Shternshis, Toronto University

Arkadi Zeltser, Yad Vashem, Jeruzalém.

***Více ke koncepci konference a požadavkům ohledně abstraktu viz výše.***