Cultural Exchanges between USSR and Popular Democracies (Bucharest, 16-17 Jul16)

Bucharest, Romania, Jul 16–17, 2016
Deadline: Jun 26, 2016

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La place du grand frère. Cultural Exchanges Between the Soviet Union and the Popular Democracies during the Communist Era

The role played by the USSR in the popular democracies in Central and Eastern Europe is both overestimated and underestimated in current works. It is overestimated in numerous studies, which consider the imposing force of the “Soviet-type model” to have been acquired when these countries fell under the Soviet sphere of influence at the end of World War II. The mere definition of the model per se was however anything but clear; its transplantation had many loopholes and the adoption of this model showed significant discrepancies depending on the periods and areas taken into consideration. It is underestimated since the entire array of exchanges made with the USSR during the socialist period have rarely been fully considered, given that the USSR was one of the main destinations chosen by the various players of the socialist stage. This historiographical situation of both over- and under-estimation may be explained, to a large extent, by the sources mobilised at the time: on the one hand, the discourse celebrating the collaboration with the Soviet “big brother” and, on the other hand, the accounts made after 1989, which often fail to mention the connections with the USSR (favouring the ones with the Western world). Another two factors which also interfered with the historiographical reflexion were the emphasis placed on the memories of the big geopolitical crises which led to Soviet military intervention (in 1953 in East Berlin, in 1956 in Budapest and in 1968 in Prague), and the evolution of the relations between each of these countries and the Russian power following the fall of the Berlin Wall.
Through this conference, we propose that this issue be readdressed again, and we invite researchers working on the topic of the USSR and the popular democracies to debate on the topic so as to reflect on the sources and notions used to report such exchanges. We shall focus on cultural exchanges in fields such as theatre, literature, music, visual arts, architecture and cinematography. The various ways in which the Soviet-type model was received replay the whole story of the Soviet presence and its versions in the various countries. By bringing together the various national histories, we may acquire an overall comparative understanding of how each country shaped its own cultural communist experience. How can the cultural field support us in rethinking the question of the Soviet presence in the East? This international conference aims to put the evolutions of the relations between the popular democracies and the USSR into perspective though culture. We also hope to reach a better understanding of a topic we now know little of: did the Soviets have any interest in what was happening within the popular democracies? Do we need to consider cultural transfers from the popular democracies to the USSR?

The participants are invited to reflect upon several lines of approach:
1. The cultural institutions and policies. Contributions on this topic could look into the role of cultural associations, “creative and professional unions” or cultural administration institutions, concerning activities such as the definition of cultural policies, the establishment of cultural agreements, the performance of protocol or documentation visits, the transfer of experts, the imposition or the reclassification of the artistic or literary creation models.
2. The cultural actors and the cross-border networks. The considerations on this topic should emphasise the routes taken by the intellectuals, artistes and experts in various cultural fields, or by the representatives of administrative and political structures who were initiators, mediators or beneficiaries of the exchanges and circulation to the East, or those who were excluded from them. The proposals could relate to, amongst other things, the biographies of people involved in cultural commerce activities, the artistic and intellectual background of those trained in the USSR, the cross-border cultural exchange network, etc.
3. The dissemination, reception, circulation and re-appropriation of the discourses, know-how, practices and goods. The contributions on this axis could delve into how the public, the cultural agents or the political and administrative authorities perceived the Soviet culture, and how the Soviets perceived the culture of its sister-countries, respectively. How did the popular democracies accommodate the things the Soviets sent to them? What did the collaborations between the various countries and the USSR focus on precisely? What were the official or clandestine circuits for people and works? What were the advantages or disadvantages of the exchanges with the USSR? In which artistic forms was the political and cultural power of the “Soviet Big Brother” celebrated or challenged?
4. The geography of cultural exchanges. What role was played by the Soviet Republics bordering the popular democracies (the Republics of Ukraine, Byelorussia and Moldova) in the exchanges with the centre and the other countries in the Soviet bloc? Did this movement benefit from the geographical proximity? More generally, which cities (besides Moscow and Leningrad) and regions in the USSR, and which cities and regions in Eastern Europe, were concerned by these exchanges? What does the movement map look like for this period?

The paper proposals (title and abstract of a maximum of 500 words), accompanied by a short biographical note (a maximum of 10 lines), should be submitted before June 26, 2016 to the e-mail addresses: popescualinaa@yahoo.fr and luciadragomir@gmail.com. Their acceptance will be notified, at the latest, on June 30, 2016.
The working language will be mainly French, but papers in English will also be accepted. The conference proceedings will be subject to publication.
Travel and accommodation expenses will be refunded within the limits of the available budget. When submitting a proposal, attendees should mention whether they wish to benefit from this refund.

Organising committee:
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Centre de recherche en histoire européenne comparée (CRHEC) – Université Paris-Est Créteil Val-de-Marne
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Reference:
CFP: Cultural Exchanges between USSR and Popular Democracies (Bucharest, 16-17 Jul16). In: ArtHist.net, Jun 19, 2016 (accessed Nov 18, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/13314>.