De-Stalinisation reconsidered

Persistence and Change in the Soviet Union

von

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Leseprobe

From Stalinist Terror to Collective Constraints. 'Homo Sovieticus' and the 'Soviet People' after Stalin

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"A flock of migrating birds was flying south, and a small but proud bird said: 'I want to fly to the sun'. He flew higher and higher up, but soon burnt his wings and was thrown down to the bottom of a deep ravine. Therefore, let us raise a toast: regardless of how high we may fly, let none of us ever leave the collective."

In Leonid Gaidai's 1967 comedy 'The Caucasian Prisoner', a young folk-lorist named Shurik travels the Caucasus in order to explore the local cul-ture and customs. The success of his scientific endeavour, is however lim-ited to learning various drinking toasts. One toast, playing on the myth of Icarus, became commonplace during the Brezhnev era, and was a part of many joyful get-togethers. Playfully ironic in the film, the toast was em-bedded in a broader social context, which explains its popularity. Central to its meaning is the satirisation of the late Soviet social contract, which has been described as a "little deal" (Millar) or an "organized mass consensus" (Zaslavsky). In this regard, 'de-Stalinisation' meant the replacement of physical terror with collective social constraints.

While this Russian Icarus refers to the protective function of the col-lective, the Polish-American writer and sociologist Jerzy Kosinski ad-dresses another dimension. His novel 'The Painted Bird' (1965) depicts the four-year odyssey of a small boy during the Second World War and his encounter with Lekh, one of the locals in the disputed border area between Poland and the Belorussian Soviet Republic. Lekh, an unconventional loner and outsider yearning for a free and unrestrained life, is blinded by his love for the 'stupid Ludmila' who lives in the woods and offers her sexual services to the men of the village for free. On one occasion when Ludmila disappears for a longer time, Lekh, driven to despair, sacrifices the most valuable thing he owns-his caged birds. One by one, he releases them back into the wild. Lekh paints them and watches on as they got torn to pieces by their fellow birds. The intended moral of the story becomes clear when put into the context of the author's own biography. Following a study trip to the Soviet Union, Kosinski published a sociological study in 1962, entitled 'No Third Path'.

In this text he argues that the physical terror which had been employed against the individual under Stalin had been replaced from 1953 onwards by collective constraints. In his book, Kosinski reserved a prominent place for Warwara, an enthusiast for literature, who was banned from the journalistic profession after deviating from the party line on cultural questions. Warwara explains her fate by recounting a childhood experience with that very same painted bird: a group of youngsters painted a sparrow red, in the expectation that he would be admired by his fellow sparrows. But the grey swarm instinctively attacked and killed him. Here, the painting of a being striving for freedom symbolises a form of individualism which is considered inopportune-the innocent bird is transformed into an outsider. For the perpetrators, the killing is justified by distrust and a hatred for deviation from the norm. The 'Painted Bird' can thus be read as a dramatic parable for the Sovietisation of living conditions. The isolation of deviants and the criminalisation of

non-conformism replaced the mass-violence of the Stalin era.
While the toast from the 'Caucasian Prisoner' refers to the protective aspect of the collective, the metaphor of the 'Painted Bird' portrays the martial enforcement of conformism within the collective. Only by exam-ining both of these dimensions together can we arrive at a better under-standing of the complex relationship between the individual and the col-lective under 'Real Socialism'. For Khrushchev the collective constituted a means of control over society, while for millions of Soviet citizens in factories, laboratories and on state farms it became a daily social institution. For some mountaineers, environmentalists or balladeers it even came to serve as a sphere of protest and differentiation from the mainstream. The collective therefore offers an interesting perspective for a discussion of several questions related to social stability, daily life and the individual in late Socialism. Here, the death of Stalin and the period commonly associated with 'de-Stalinisation' and the 'Thaw' play a crucial role.

'Open Society' as a Challenge for Historical Research on the Late Soviet Union

In an open letter to the Russian readers of his book 'The Open Society and Its Enemies', Karl Popper highlighted the importance of the rule of law as a condition for democracy and the market economy. His aim was the protection of civil society. For Popper, the Soviet Union was a failed project which derived its legitimacy from dubious historical laws. He drew a distinction between an 'open society', based on individual decisions and abstract social relations, and a 'closed society', characterised by collective ideas and organic units. Although Popper consistently denied that there was any larger meaning to or overriding explanation of world history, he identified the transformation from closed to open societies as mankind's greatest achievement.
Popper's optimistic vision was reinforced by the euphoria generated among Western intellectuals following on from the end of the Cold War and the dismantling of the Eastern Bloc. The so-called 'Archival Revolu-tion' of the 1990s led to increasing scepticism concerning the assumed 'atomisation' of Soviet society under Stalin, a diagnosis inspired by the totalitarianism-paradigm. The relaxation of censorship and the rehabilita-tion of the victims of Stalinist terror under Khrushchev even gave rise to the establishment of informal networks and interest groups beyond the Party-dominated public domain.
Nevertheless, Popper's distinction between an 'open' and a 'closed so-ciety' needs to be borne in mind when considering the failure of the Soviet Union. A leitmotif running through the Secret Speech in 1956, the promises to overcome the cult of personality and rehabilitate the victims of Stalinist terror and the commitment to solve the housing question or to raise the standard of living can be determined. It was not trust in democ-racy, central to Popper's thought, which played a pivotal role in this particular period, but rather an enduring faith in communism.
Historians investigating the Soviet Union after 1953 have begun to ad-dress a whole range of questions. What role did the growing gap between aspiration and reality play in the increasing separation of state and society? The cultural Thaw and the burgeoning consumer revolution certainly con-tributed to Soviet citizens' desire for a more individualistic lifestyle, but it remains debatable whether this apparent retreat into the private sphere was accompanied by a more general political indifference.
The relationship between modernisation from above and normalisation from below (in the sense of

life becoming more predictable) requires further explanation. Did Soviet society remain solely a construction of the Party or did Soviet people witness the development of social ties and interactions which went beyond mere consumption and petitioning? Certain terms and concepts which historians deploy in their analysis, such as that of 'Soviet society' can be called into question. Several historians have also voiced scepticism about the usefulness of dichotomies such as 'state' and 'society', 'dissent' and 'loyalty' or 'reform' and 'stagnation'.

The concept of 'de-Stalinisation', for instance, refers both to the politi-cal process and to the period at large. The term fails to incorporate numerous central developments of the 1950s and 1960s, and the use of the term was already controversial among contemporaries. In publicly professing their desire to 'overcome the cult of personality', different historical actors were actually pursuing very different political objectives. Questioning and dissolving these dichotomies offers us the possibility of arriving at a better understanding not only of the Khrushchev period, but of the central mechanisms of the Soviet Union as a whole.