



*Perestroika and Communist Parties in Europe (1985-1990/91). Reception, Reactions and Consequences.* Francesco Di Palma / Arnd Bauerkämper, Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin, 25.02.2016—26.02.2016.

**Reviewed by** Kilian Bartikowski

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## **Perestroika and Communist Parties in Europe (1985-1990/91). Reception, Reactions and Consequences**

In March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* are still very present in our memory due to the profound political changes in the USSR and the Eastern bloc. However, the new political context for the Communist parties in the West is far less prominent. The topic is still an open field of historical research. The international conference *Perestroika and Communist Parties in Europe (1985-1990/91). Reception, Reactions and Consequences* in Berlin organized by Francesco Di Palma and Arnd Bauerkämper at the Friedrich Meinecke Institute (FU-Berlin) and funded by the *Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED Diktatur* (Federal Foundation for the Study of Communist Dictatorship in East Germany) aimed to close this gap by analyzing not only the national and international, but also transnational context of Gorbachev's reforms and their repercussions. Thus, the workshop dealt with both the critical perception of this *new thinking* as well as entanglements with other communist parties in Eastern and Western Europe.

Over two days, the participants of the conference discussed, from various national and political perspectives, the following key questions raised by the conference organizers: 1. How did the radical political shift in Moscow affect the bilateral relationships between communist parties in Eastern and Western Europe? 2. How did European communist parties perceive, appropriate or reject *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*? 3. What impact did *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* have on the strategic alignment

of the communist parties in Eastern Europe?

The first panel dealt with the *USSR and Perestroika*. The contributions examined Gorbachev's politics of *reform communism*, both within the Soviet Union and its satellite nations. MARK KRAMER (Harvard) investigated *Soviet Society during the Perestroika Era* and pointed out that Jerry Hough's assumption of 1980 that a long-term modernization of Soviet society was to Gorbachev's advantage cannot be totally neglected. However, it must be seen in a far wider context. Modernization in the Soviet Union was particularly accelerated by information technology, modern media and a new wave of exchanges between Soviet citizens and Western cultures after 1985. Kramer emphasized that despite disagreements over the benefits of describing the Soviet Union as an empire state, the comparison of the Soviet case with large and contiguous empires of the past can be quite revealing. Moreover, it can be useful to compare the Soviet Union with other former Communist multi-ethnic European countries like the Czechoslovak state and former Yugoslavia as well as with states such as India and Indonesia in order to shed light on the fact that the Soviet Union did not dissolve entirely. PETER RUGGENTHALER (Graz) analyzed the *The Impact of Perestroika and Glasnost on the CPSU's Stance toward the fraternal Parties in the Eastern Bloc*. He concluded that *Perestroika* led to the formation of opposing political camps amongst the CPSU's *fraternal parties*, however for different reasons and with different outcomes. Whereas the Polish and Hungarian Communist parties remained the closest allies of the CPSU, the

Romanian communist party openly announced its opposition. The close relationship with Poland was due to its internal reform process caused by the *Solidarność* movement. In Hungary, it resulted from the opening of its foreign policy. The Romanian and Bulgarian communist leaders had different motives in opposing Gorbachev and his reforms. The Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceausescu, a bitter opponent of *Perestroika* from the very beginning, was increasingly despised by Gorbachev. However, the Soviet Union applied little pressure on Romania to prevent it from leaving the Warsaw pact a second time. The Bulgarian General Secretary Todor Živkov lost Gorbachev's support due to his rigorous foreign policy towards Turkey. Thus, a coup against Živkov was supported, but not strictly enforced by Moscow. SILVIO PONS (Rome) paper examined the global approach of Gorbachev's new thinking. It argued that a global controversial discussion arose amongst communist leaders, probably best illustrated by the very different stances taken by Fidel Castro and Gorbachev. Pons arrived at the conclusion that the Eurocommunist movement and its proximity to *reform communism* remained the only realistic perspective with regard to a partnership with the USSR.

The second panel dealt with *East-Central Europe* and *Perestroika*. In his presentation, HERRMANN WENTKER (Berlin) explained that Erich Honecker's perception of the political change in the Soviet Union had not always been negative. From 1987 onward, however, the SED leadership perceived *Perestroika* as a threat to its power and to the existence of the GDR. An important factor was that large swathes of SED members saw in Gorbachev's policy and implicit admission that socialism could be reformed, whereas higher ranking East German party functionaries did not agree with his political stance. As a consequence, Gorbachev contributed to the erosion of the SED and its power. MAXIMILIAN GRAF (Vienna) observed a similar development in the perception of the Austrian communists, the *Kommunistische Partei Österreichs* (KPÖ). The KPÖ initially welcomed *Perestroika*. However, after a short period of *reform communism* they shared the concerns of the East German communists, as they feared repercussions on the Socialist bloc and on the Austrian communist party itself. WANDA JARZABEK (Warsaw) presentation demonstrated that the Polish perception of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* differed from the East German and Austrian contexts. The Polish government was initially cautious and reluctant to clearly express their opinion to Gorbachev's reforms. After 1987, however, it altered its attitude when

it became clear that changes in the Soviet Union would continue. Jarzabek pointed out that Gorbachev's new policy did not cause the reforms in Poland, but it did have a decisive impact on the process of change as a whole in Poland, probably due to the close relationship between Jaruzelski and Gorbachev.

A third section was dedicated to *Smaller Western European Communist Parties and Perestroika*. STEFAN BERGER (Bochum) and NORMAN LAPORTE (Cardiff) gave a joint paper on the British communists. They argued that the *reform communist* idea became increasingly stronger after 1968 in the United Kingdom. Moreover, they stressed that Gorbachev's political changes were connected to simultaneous hopes of a reinforcement of renewed communism in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the fall of the GDR and with it the disintegration of *really-existing socialism* accelerated the dissolution of British communism into a broad left alliance. GERRIT VOERMAN (Groningen) noted in his presentation that the collapse of the Socialist regimes and the Soviet Union was a shock for Dutch communists as they truly believed in the potential of *reform communism*.

The fourth panel was organized around the topic of how the large communist parties in Western Europe dealt with *Perestroika*. ALDO AGOSTI (Turin) made the point that the Italian communist party PCI had already begun searching in 1984, after the death of its general secretary Enrico Berlinguer, for a new identity and thus discussed far-reaching reforms of the party structure and new political goals for its program (e.g. ecology movement and women's movement). On the other hand, the deep institutional, political and moral crisis of the Italian political system made restructurings of the PCI particularly difficult; at the same time the Italian communists had to cope with the break-down of world communism. In the same way, DOMINIQUE ANDOLFATTO (Grenoble) noted in his presentation that the French Communist party – one of the leading political parties in France – had to deal with the ongoing loss of party members and voters. As a consequence, the PCF and its leadership remained rather reluctant to embrace Gorbachev's new political course. WALTHER BERNECKER (Nuremberg) explained that the Spanish communist party had to face similar problems and therefore changed its political leadership. During the restructuring measures within the PCE, the Spanish communists remained uncertain over the reforms in the Soviet Union.

The final panel examined reactions in Southeast Europe. PETAR DRAGISIC (Belgrade) considered the situ-

ation in Yugoslavia. He concluded that despite the overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the Soviet experiment, Yugoslav party leaders did not consider âPerestroikaâ as a model to be imported or copied. In understanding themselves as Titoâs heirs they were utterly convinced of the benefits of their âroad to socialismâ and in their ability to improve their system on their own. Both STEFANO BOTTONIâs (Budapest) and TAMAS BARANYIâs (Budapest) papers demonstrated that alongside economic factors the personal relationships between the party leaders played a particularly important role in whether the idea of âPerestroikaâ was accepted or not. Whereas Karol Groszâs very short regency after Janos Kadarâs resignation in 1988 opened the door for âPerestroikaâ and âGlasnostâ in Hungary, the Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceausescu remained from the very beginning an adversary of Gorbachevâs reforms.

To conclude, the conference showcased a vast variety of perceptions of and reactions to Gorbachevâs reforms. E.g. the Western European communist parties initially welcomed Gorbachevâs coming to power. Yet, his reforms and the dissolution of the CPSU had indirect implications in accelerating the crisis of the two most important communist parties in the West, the PCI and PCF. In the Eastern bloc, Gorbachevâs appointment as General Secretary intensified the already existing conflicts between hard-liners and reformers. The lively discussions on each participantâs paper at the conference confirmed the importance of international exchange with regard to this topic. Not least, the conference demonstrated that the international and transnational approach is fruitful for further research on the history of communist parties in twentieth-century Europe.

#### **Conference overview:**

Welcoming Address and Keynotes: Francesco Di Palma (Berlin) / Arnd BauerkÃmpfer (Berlin)

##### *Panel 1 "USSR and Perestroika"*

Chair: Francesco Di Palma (Berlin)

Mark Kramer (Harvard): Soviet Society during the Perestroika Era

Peter Ruggenthaler (Graz): The Impact of Perestroika and Glasnost on the CPSU's Stance toward the fraternal Parties in the Eastern Bloc

Silvio Pons (Rome): Gorbachev, New Thinking, and

the End of International Communism

##### *Panel 2 "East-Central Europe and Perestroika"*

Chair: Arnd BauerkÃmpfer (Berlin)

Hermann Wentker (Berlin): SED and Perestroika: Perceptions and Reactions (1985-1989)

Maximilian Graf (Vienna): The Austrian Communists and Perestroika

Wanda JarzÄbek (Warsaw): The PUWP's Attitude to Glasnost and Perestroika

##### *Panel 3 "Smaller Western European Communist Parties and Perestroika"*

Chair: Maximilian Graf (Vienna)

Stefan Berger (Bochum) und Norman LaPorte (Cardiff): A Dialogue of the Deaf: the CPGB and the SED during the Gorbachev era, c. 1985-1990

Gerrit Voerman (Groningen): Premature Perestroika. The Dutch Communist Party and Gorbachev

##### *Panel 4 "Western Europe and Perestroika"*

Chair: Kilian Bartikowski (Berlin)

Aldo Agosti (Turin): In dubious Battle: the PCI and the Search for a new Identity in the 1980s

Dominique Andolfatto (Grenoble): "I felt as if I was faced with a French Honecker": The French Communist Party confronted with a World that was falling apart (1985-1991)

Walther Bernecker (Nuremberg): The Partido Comunista de Espana and Perestroika

##### *Panel 5 "Southeast Europe and Perestroika"*

Chair: Peter Ruggenthaler (Graz)

Petar Dragisic (Belgrade): A View from Afar: The Yugoslav Communists and Perestroika

Stefano Bottoni (Budapest): Dialogue of the deaf. Romanian Reactions to Perestroika and the final Crisis of the Ceausescu Regime

TamÃs Baranyi (Budapest): Perestroika Made in Hungary? Moving Beyond ClichÃs in Soviet-Hungarian Relations during the Gorbachev Era

Final remarks and discussion: Francesco Di Palma (Berlin) / Arnd BauerkÃmpfer (Berlin)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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