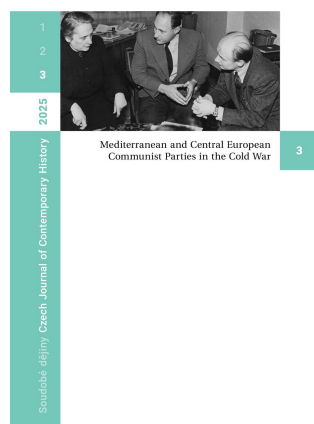


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The Struggle for Legitimacy

A Contribution to the Scholarship on Domination and Participation in the Socialist Dictatorships of East-Central Europe

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DONERT, Celia – KLADNIK, Ana – SABROW, Martin (eds.):

Making Sense of Dictatorship: Domination and Everyday Life in East Central Europe After 1945.

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280 pages, ISBN 9789633864272.

When I sat in the audience of a panel entitled “Making Sense of Dictatorship” at the annual conference of the British Association for Slavic and East European Studies (BASEES) in 2022, I had no idea that I was at a launch of the book of the same name. Nor did I know that a few minutes later, in a modern seminar room overlooking the sunny springtime courtyard of Robinson College, University of Cambridge, I would feel as I did when studying in the irregularly shaped rooms of Celetná Street in Prague, where I attended social history seminars as part of my studies in history about ten years ago. It was there that I first encountered concepts such as *Sinnwelt* and *Eigen-Sinn* and a way of asking questions that went beyond my previous experience in most of the courses I attended. In the time

between these two moments, however, a number of events took place that affected how the book here reviewed would be received, and which should be considered. I will attempt to briefly summarize these events at the outset before turning to the book itself.

The beginning and institutional basis for the research and publication activities culminating in the book *Making Sense of Dictatorship* was the project *Sozialistische Diktatur als Sinnwelt: Repräsentationen gesellschaftlicher Ordnung und Herrschaftswandel in Ostmitteleuropa in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhundert*, supported by the Volkswagen Stiftung, and conducted between 2007 and 2010.¹ The project, led by Pavel Kolář, Thomas Lindenberger and Martin Sabrow at the Centre for Research in Contemporary History in Potsdam (*Zentrum für zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam*) and Michal Kopeček at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague (*Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR*), asked questions about the nature and transformations of governance in socialist dictatorships in the post-war period. It also included a reflection on the methods and concepts available to historians for examining socialist societies. An important part of the identity of the project was a comparative approach, examining similar phenomena in different countries ruled by socialist dictatorships.

The researchers involved in the project were also important actors in the dispute over the interpretation of the normalization period and the causes of the regime change in 1989, a debate that was triggered by the publication of Michal Pullmann's book *Konec experimentu* [The End of the Experiment].² This controversy, which significantly impacted the Czech public debate, highlighted a number of questions posed by the aforementioned project. Can the stability of socialist dictatorships be explained by repression alone? Were people able to live meaningful lives under normalization? Why did these regimes collapse so quickly? These issues dominated Czech debates about "communism" in the following years. The whole controversy eventually replicated itself in a much more predictable way during the summer of 2020, in response to the refusal of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, headed by Michal Pullmann, to display a banner with the portrait of the democratic politician Milada Horáková (1901–1951) and the slogan "Murdered by the Communists". It can safely be said that some of the issues and results of the project have over time become part of the cultural wars of Czech society, and have recurred in various transformations and contexts.

¹ See KOPEČEK, Michal – KOLÁŘ, Pavel: Projekt „Socialistická diktatura jako myšlenkový svět“. In: *Soudobé dějiny*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2012), pp. 189–195.

² PULLMANN, Michal: *Konec experimentu: Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu*. Praha, Scriptorium 2011.

Although the publication of *Making Sense of Dictatorship* is symbolically the culmination of the project, a number of studies have already been published by members of the project team and their collaborators, based on their work on the project. The aforementioned book by Pullmann as well as Matěj Spurný's book entitled *Nejsou jako my* [They Are Not like Us] were published in 2011.³ However, in the book reviewed here, Spurný has already dealt with a sub-topic relating to the demolition of the city of Most in Northern Bohemia and the construction of a new city.⁴ Among foreign authors, Czech readers could become acquainted with a part of Ana Kladnik's research.⁵ Ciprian Cîrniala published a book on the Romanian police apparatus in 2018.⁶ An issue of *Soudobé dějiny* was also dedicated to the project.⁷ Thus, in the scholarly publishing practice, there are already a number of outputs linked to the *Sozialistische Diktatur als Sinnwelt* project, either directly by the author's themselves or through shared methodological assumptions.

Making Sense of Dictatorship, edited by Celia Donert, Ana Kladnik and Martin Sabrow, was published in 2022 by the Central European University Press. The book is introduced by two theoretical studies written respectively by Martin Sabrow and Thomas Lindenberger, explaining the key concepts of *Sinnwelt* and *Eigen-Sinn*. These give an insight into the theoretical background behind the project and the discussions that took place among its members. According to the foreword by Pavel Kolář and Michal Kopeček, the book presents to an international audience the results of a project that contributed to a "gradual paradigmatic turn" in the study of socialist dictatorships. The authors characterize it as follows:

"In historical research, 'communist totalitarianism' is no longer taken out of its historical context as the opposite of democracy but has instead become a standard historical phenomenon in a particular time and place. This largely natural historicization of socialist dictatorships opens up the possibility of comparative studies: if communism is becoming an historical phenomenon with a clear beginning and end – like, say, the Great Depression – then it is obviously not a national exception, but a general manifestation of European modernity. More than a decade has passed since our group carried out its research." (p. xi)

³ SPURNÝ, Matěj: *Nejsou jako my: Česká společnost a menšiny v pohraničí (1945–1960)*. Praha, Antikomplex 2011.

⁴ IDEM: *Making the Most of Tomorrow: A Laboratory of Socialist Modernity in Czechoslovakia*. Prague, Karolinum Press 2019.

⁵ KLADNIK, Ana: Vietor veje v smere severovýchod–juhovýchod. In: *Historie – otázky – problémy*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2010), pp. 127–133.

⁶ CÎRNIALA, Ciprian: *Ceaușescus Polizei: Herrschaft, Ruhe und Ordnung in Rumänien (1960–1989)*. Berlin, De Gruyter 2018.

⁷ *Soudobé dějiny*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2012), pp. 189–274.

At the core of the book are studies that examine the nature of socialist dictatorship always from a specific case and perspective. The first set of case studies focuses on the relationship between authority and domination. In his study, Ciprian Cîrniala, a Romanian historian based in Germany, describes the career of a member of the Romanian criminal police force through the analysis of oral history interviews and written sources. He shows that even a member of the security forces was part of longer-term transformations in the regime's legitimacy, and that the behaviour of the investigator (among other things, a non-member of the Communist Party and a man of faith) was both legitimizing and delegitimizing.

The German historian Hedwig Richter focuses on the system of informing, reporting and denunciation in East Germany. However, she turns her perspective not only to the "informers" who knowingly cooperated with the secret police, but also to the flow of information in general, which was directed from the population to the state authorities. She shows that this way of reporting information about subversion was significantly more widespread and accepted in East German society than cooperation with the police. The study thus presents surveillance during the dictatorship as a bureaucratic process that was perceived as legitimate by most of society. It is a pity that more space is not devoted to the ways in which the state handled this information, especially in relation to those who were identified in the reports as threatening elements.

In his contribution, Michal Pullmann uses the term "uncertain elite" to characterize the top leaders of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*) in the face of perestroika and its challenges in the form of pressure for economic and social change. He cites, as the causes of this situation, the breakdown of the ideological language and its inability to absorb new stimuli and issues, the unpreparedness of the leadership after years of normalization for a real debate, and the prevalence of the ideal of individual success over the vision of a collective effort for a more just society.

Another part of the book is devoted to "everyday social practices". It opens with a text by Slovenian historian Ana Kladnik focusing on self-governance and volunteering in the Slovenian industrial city of Velenje. She examines the extent and forms of participation of the inhabitants in the development of the city, which was made possible by the policies of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (*Savez komunista Jugoslavije*) after the split with the Soviet Union. The construction of Velenje appears here as an example of long-term volunteerism that resulted in both the modernization of the city and a greater cohesion of the local community. In her study, the Hungarian historian Annina Gagyiova examines consumer practices in the context of the Hungarian Trade Union's "Washing Machine Campaign" in the late 1950s. According to the author, consumer practices in this period can be understood as a way of expressing an attitude towards

the ruling regime, including the arbitrary appropriation of its social policies for purposes other than those originally intended. It is also one of the texts in the book that deals with the emancipation of women under socialist dictatorships.

In her study, the Polish historian Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, who has also published several books on the subject, examines the project of socialist modernity from a female perspective.⁸ The focus of the study is the status of unmarried, single mothers in the People's Republic of Poland (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*). She documents the significant neglect of unmarried mothers by Polish society, as well as significantly lower support from the state compared to other socialist countries. This study is also based on a combination of the personal testimonies of women and official sources documenting the social policy of the People's Republic of Poland. The story of an unofficial kindergarten in East Berlin is explored by the British historian Celia Donert. She uses the case of an independently run children's group to thematize the relationship between private and public, as well as the post-war reconstruction of Berlin, during one of the phases in which the old city centre became the seat of alternatively minded communities, particularly linked to the anti-war and environmental movements.

The last series of studies focuses on the role of intellectuals and experts in (de)legitimizing socialist regimes. Matěj Spurný's main hypothesis is "that the change in the *Sinnwelt* of the local people, which is linked to the crisis of organized industrial modernity beginning in the 1960s, could not be stopped even in an authoritarian system such as a socialist dictatorship" (p. 179).⁹ The example of Most shows that the late socialist elites were unable to integrate the new narratives associated with the crisis of industrial modernity into their language and thus deprived themselves of an essential pillar of their legitimacy. The Hungarian historian Péter Apor, who deals with the transformation of community life, asks questions in a similar framework. Using several examples, he shows community life as a reaction to the technocratic approach of socialist elites and rigid official collectivism.

The American historian Jonathan Larson focuses his study on Czechoslovak samizdat. In his chapter, he points out some neglected parts of the samizdat

⁸ KLICH-KLUCZEWSKA, Barbara: *Family, Taboo and Communism in Poland, 1956–1989*. Bern, Peter Lang 2021. (The book had been published in Polish in 2015 under the title *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm w Polsce, 1956–1989*. Kraków, Liberian 2015.) See also: STAŃCZAK-WIŚLICZ, Katarzyna – PERKOWSKI, Piotr – FIDELIS, Małgorzata – KLICH-KLUCZEWSKA, Barbara: *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989: Nowoczesność, równouprawnienie, komunizm*. Kraków, Universitas 2020.

⁹ Spurný's chapter entitled "Problems with Progress in Late Socialist Czechoslovakia: The Example of Most, North Bohemia" (pp. 179–202) is based on research that has previously been published in his monograph *Making the Most of Tomorrow*.

archives (e.g. Czech tramping, science fiction and other productions that did not contain explicit criticism of the regime) and the related implications for understanding what a samizdat was. Michal Kopeček examines dissident legalism in a comparative Czechoslovak-Polish perspective. He points out the differences between the two countries and observes that the concepts of socialist legality and dissident legalism can be understood as the two sides of the same coin. Kopeček also draws attention to the connection between the legalistic strategy of dissent and the non-violent and essentially legalistic transition to democracy.

The preceding list partially summarizes the theses that the texts in the book present to the reader, but also the breadth and nature of the topics addressed in it. Thus, viewed as a whole, the case studies present the theoretical framework of the book as applicable to a wide range of topics and sources. The actors in the book include party elites, members of the power apparatus, and members of alternative communities and dissidents. However, in all cases it is clear that the main focus of research is the dynamics of power, legitimacy and delegitimization in socialist dictatorships.

Although the selection of case studies does not follow any pre-determined structure, the absence of the perspectives of national or sexual minorities, and the predominant focus on urban populations and on activities that were often concentrated in cities rather than in the countryside, cannot be overlooked. For the whole book and for some of the studies, this raises the question of their representativeness. That is, to what extent do they describe a general phenomenon, or rather an exception that captures the experience of a minority of a given country's population. For example, whether volunteering played a similarly productive role in towns and villages in Slovenia other than Velenje. At the same time, it should be stressed that we do not hold in our hands a synthesis of the social history of socialist dictatorships, so these claims go beyond the contributors' own stated goals.

What most of the chapters succeed in doing, on the other hand, is to point to some of the more general phenomena associated with research on socialist dictatorships. Firstly, it is clear from all the studies which cover a longer period of time that the nature of socialist regimes had changed considerably, and with it the shape of repressive practices and people's responses to them. This, in turn, had an impact on the (de)legitimization and ultimately the collapse of these regimes. A transnational perspective is crucial. It shows that the different states – however much they shared the same power and ideological camp – had their own specificities, mainly determined by the legacy of the period before the rise of communism. This legacy then strongly influenced which social groups resisted the regime (this is well illustrated, among others, by Michal Kopeček's study) or coexisted with it in some way. At the same time, however, it can also be

seen that the policies of particular states were not identical – for example, their social policies or the ways in which they supported the emancipation of women.

The more general question is how to read the book as a whole, bearing in mind its institutional background in the original project and the leading role of some of the authors in disputes over the interpretation of the Czech experience of socialism. Moreover, whether it can bring something to readers who are not experts on particular subtopics, for example, the history of the police apparatus in Romania, or the history of volunteerism and urbanism in Slovenia, or research on socialist dictatorships in general. Several possible perspectives could be offered here.

Those who follow or have followed the scholarly debate on the study of socialist dictatorships and the search for interpretations other than strictly totalitarian ones from the beginning are likely to have the least to gain from the book. This is mainly because much of the research has already been published, either in book form or as studies in scholarly journals, and those following the debate will thus not be surprised by the nature of the texts or the methodology employed. In this respect, however, the significance of the book lies in the joint presentation of local case studies to the international expert community. What stands out in this context is the strong representation of Czech historians, and with them Czech or Czechoslovak realities, in the book.

For historians of contemporary history, however, the publication of the book creates a platform for a reflective debate on where approaches to research on this period have shifted. How would research on developments in post-socialist states during the 1990s fit into this framework? Matěj Spurný's text offers a link to the developing subject of environmental history. It also raises the question of where to look for case studies from Czechoslovakia that would correspond to foreign examples. Did independent kindergartens emerge in Czechoslovakia and how did the context of their emergence and closure differ from that of East Berlin? This reflexive perspective assumes that the approaches presented in this book will be understood not as the final stage in the development of approaches to the study of socialist dictatorships, but as part of a story with an open ending in which new paradigms are still likely to emerge.

I perceive a great potential for the book especially in relation to students of history and other humanities and social sciences. The book brings them not only theoretical studies but also a wide range of their applications. All the studies clearly present the problem under investigation and the methodology used, and at the same time have the potential to raise questions and motivate further research. The combination of reading one of the theoretical introductions and one of the studies can thus represent a model lesson for a social or contemporary history seminar at a university. Another group of readers who might find the book

useful are journalists and other professionals who comment on the past and engage in disputes over its interpretation. The book offers concrete examples of what research on socialist dictatorships can mean. Reading them does not confirm the potential authors' exaggerated notion that they deny the repressive nature of the regimes they examine, although repression is not the primary lens applied to the phenomena in question. It is in the specific cases that the interconnectedness of the pressures that socialist dictatorships exerted on their populations, the opportunities that these same regimes offered, and the strategies that populations and communities used to deal with them in lived practice, is well illustrated.

In conclusion, *Making Sense of Dictatorship* well illustrates that a scholarly text is not simply another piece in the imaginary puzzle of historical knowledge, but that its reading and reception is conditioned by a range of material, institutional and discursive circumstances both within the scholarly community as well as among the wider public. It is certain that the reading of this book will be different today than it would have been ten years ago. One can only wish that this book will not fade into obscurity as a monument to wars already fought today (at least in academia), but that it will find its own active and critical readership.

Making Sense of Dictatorship thus lives up to its name on several levels. First, it provides insight into how different actors across the societies of socialist dictatorships struggled to make sense of their social reality. But beyond that, it also comes (albeit with some delay) at a time when a number of debates about the nature of these regimes have taken place in the public sphere, including the participation of some of the contributors in this book. The latter is thus also part of the contemporary trend for "making sense of dictatorship" at the level of the cultures of memory. Last but not least, the book documents one essential phase of how historians have tried to deal with modern dictatorships. Most importantly, however, it is an imperfective aspect, because making sense of dictatorship is certainly not yet over.

Keywords:

East-Central Europe; communism; socialist dictatorships; world of meaning (*Sinnwelt*); socialist modernity; everyday life; transnational history