The Perennial Alliance?

75 Years of NATO

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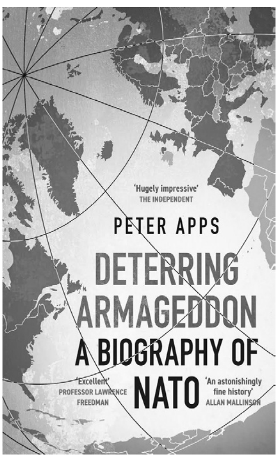

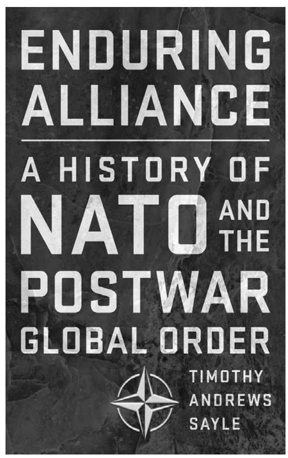

SAYLE, Timothy Andrews:
Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order.
Ithaca (NY) – London, Cornell University Press 2019, 346 pages, ISBN 978-1-5017-3550-9.

APPS, Peter:
Deterring Armageddon: A Biography of NATO.
London, Wildfire 2024, 606 pages, ISBN 978-1-03-540579-4.

Even the critics of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) readily admit that without it, the world would have been a very different place over the last three quarters of a century. "If we did not have NATO, we would have to invent it and build it," General Jim Mattis, soon to be appointed Secretary of Defence in the first Trump administration, told the sceptical president-elect in 2016.[1] Despite predictions of irrelevance, replacement, or even imminent demise,[2] the transatlantic alliance has weathered through many crises during and after the Cold War. Having surpassed in longevity the Delian League led by ancient Athens

[1] WOODWARD, Bob: *Rage*. London, Simon & Schuster 2020, p. 2–3.

[2] The Gaullist crisis triggered a spate of books predicting an impending collapse of NATO such as STEELE, Ronald: *The End of Alliance: America and the Future of Europe*. New York, Viking Press 1964. In a 1970 book an American academic, David Calleo suggests replacing NATO with a European defence coalition loosely associated with the US (CALLEO, David: *The Atlantic Fantasy: The US, NATO and Europe*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 1970).

against Persia, it is now embarking upon arguably the most ambitious military build-up since the early 1950s.

NATO's journey to becoming history's longest lasting alliance has recently been marked by a number of excellent accounts. Two in particular stand out as indispensable guides to those who want to understand the roots of its longevity and the future challenges it faces.

Timothy Andrews Sayle's *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* was published on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the alliance in 2019. Drawing upon an impressive range of published and unpublished documents, Sayle offers an impressive and detailed history focused mainly on NATO during the Cold War. His book serves as evidence that serious scholarship need not be synonymous with poor readability. In 2024's *Deterring Armageddon: A Biography of NATO*, Peter Apps penned a lively biography of the transatlantic alliance from its anxious and uncertain birth to our current day.[3]

Keeping the Russians Out?

Drawing on his in-depth study of archival documents, Canadian historian Timothy Andrews Sayle, an associate professor at the Department of History, University of Toronto, claims that the main threat to NATO's future was not so much a possible Soviet invasion. Instead, the alleged danger was that fickle citizens

3 Sayle's volume easily qualifies as the first comprehensive Cold War history of NATO based on extensive archival research. A great many first-class books have covered various aspects and periods. In his book *The Long Entanglement: NATO First Fifty Years* (Westport /CT/, Praeger 1999), as well as other volumes, Lawrence S. Kaplan interprets NATO history mainly through the US lens. The debates and policies have been extensively covered by Helga Haftendorn in *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution: A Crisis of Credibility, 1966–1967* (Oxford, Clarendon 1996). The 2001 three-volume *History of NATO: The First Fifty Years* (Houndmills, Palgrave 2001) edited by Gustav Schmidt contains a collection of essays on various topics from NATO's past and present. While useful, it hardly brings a central thesis that would contribute to our understanding of NATO's longevity. The same goes for *The Routledge Handbook of NATO*, edited by John Andreas Olsen (London – New York, Routledge 2024). In addition to Sayle's and Apps's volumes, Sten Rynning has authored another accomplished book on NATO's 75-year history – *NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine. A History of the World's Most Powerful Alliance* (New Haven, Yale University Press 2024). One missing element of all these useful books (as well of the two volumes reviewed in this text) is the impact of NATO's policies and capabilities on its Eastern counterpart. Filling the gap was one of the objectives of the now defunct "Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security" led by the Czech-American historian Vojtech Mastny which, however, ended up revealing more on the Eastern Alliance than on NATO (see *Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security (PHP)* [online], © 2000–2010. [Accessed 2025-11-01.] Available at: https://phpisn.ethz.ch/lory1.ethz.ch/index.html).

might either "press their leaders to concede" during the early stages of the Cold War or succumb to Soviet peace overtures again during the later decades. Hastings Lionel Ismay (1887–1965), later NATO's First Secretary General, reportedly said that NATO aimed at "keeping the Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans down".[4] For Sayle, however, NATO was less an expression of democracy than an insurance policy against its vagaries. Poor choices at the ballot box could result in a "European populace bullied by the threat of war" with the Soviet Union or bring to helm either "a resurgent German chancellor" or "an isolationist Congress or president" (Sayle, p. 4).

Sayle brings forward many quotes from actors on the Western side, who, usually with the benefit of hindsight, indeed indicate that the scourge of an impending Soviet military invasion was not the primary concern for the most of the Cold War period. Yet, it would be rash to dismiss the Soviet threat as mostly imaginary.

Although there is far more to praise than fault in Sayle's text, he draws exclusively on Western and mainly English-language sources. Pulling back the Iron Curtain, however, offers a more complex picture. As we now know, a military attack on the West by the Soviets and their allies was indeed never imminent. Still, at a meeting of Eastern European leaders in Moscow in January 1951, Stalin called for the building of modern, strong armies, ready for combat, over the next few years in order to "seize this unique opportunity to spread socialism throughout Europe".[5] While the available materials indicate that military planning in the Eastern Bloc did not fundamentally translate Stalin's call into concrete operational preparations,[6] Stalin's order did trigger a real and massive rearmament across the Eastern Bloc.[7]

The deterrent effect of a formal link of the United States to the security of Europe should not be dismissed out of hand. While Stalin made no secret of his low opinion of Western armed forces, including those of the U.S., his musings

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[4] Ismay apparently uttered the quip before the members of the British parliament in 1949 (HENNESSY, Peter: *Never Again: Britain, 1945–1951*. New York, Pantheon Books 1993, p. 253).

[5] KAPLAN, Karel: *Dans les archives du Comité Central: Trente ans de secrets du bloc soviétique.* Paris, Michel 1978, pp. 165–166. All translations from the French by the author.

[6] See LUŇÁK, Petr: War Plans from Stalin to Brezhnev: The Czechoslovak Pivot. In: MASTNY, Vojtech – HOLTSMARK, Sven G. – WENGER, Andreas (eds.): *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War: Threat Perceptions in the East and the West*. London, Routledge 2006, pp. 72–94, here pp. 73–76.

[7] KAPLAN, K.: *Dans les archives du Comité Central*, pp. 165–166. See also MASTNY, Vojtech: *NATO in the Beholder's Eye: Soviet Perceptions and Policies, 1949–56*. (Cold War International History Project Working Paper, No. 35.) Washington, D. C., Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 2002, pp. 28–30. Available online at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/ACFB01.pdf.

also imply how important it was for him to know if and how America would enter a potential conflict. The despot underlined that within three to four years, Washington would supposedly be able to transport “reinforcements to Europe and use its atomic superiority”, hence the apparent need to prepare Soviet forces in the meantime.[8]

It was the North Atlantic Treaty and the ensuing buildup of NATO as an integrated structure that fundamentally minimized uncertainty in the case of potential miscalculation by Stalin such as his approval of North Korea’s invasion of the South in 1950. Any doubts about American (non)involvement in a potential European conflict beyond Stalin’s rule were further reduced as the number of American troops in Europe increased, even more so from 1954 when they were equipped with tactical nuclear weapons.

The absence of preparations on the part of the Eastern block to launch an attack against the West notwithstanding, other parts of this history are less soothing. While the Western deterrence did not fail against the foolhardiest steps on Moscow’s part, it was less successful in dissuading Stalin’s successors from allowing drafting of extremely daring offensive plans in case a clash with the West comes to pass. This was to happen not necessarily as the outcome of deliberate assault by either side but rather stemming from a miscalculation or a crisis getting out of control. This was a scenario not entirely unimaginable for example during the Berlin Crisis (1958–1962), triggered and then mismanaged by Nikita S. Khrushchev. Warsaw Pact operational plans from the first half of the 1960s up until the Gorbachev period aimed at “marching down the Champs Elysées or occupying the Channel ports” (p. 2) – to use Sayle’s flowery language – in just a few weeks. Curiously, these offensive plans were adopted at a time of East-West *détente*, showing how military planning parted company with the overall political context.[9] In such a scenario, it was not only the will to resist and defend but also the possession of real capabilities that mattered for the West to halt the Eastern offensive and bring the conflict to a negotiated conclusion.

Fickle Voters?

Rightly seeing the history of NATO as a “kaleidoscope of domestic politics and national foreign policies” (p. 7), Sayle focuses on policy deliberations and decisions.

[8] KAPLAN, K.: *Dans les archives du Comité Central*, pp. 165–166.

[9] LUŇÁK, P.: War Plans from Stalin to Brezhnev. See also the collection of Czechoslovak plans from 1950 to 1990 published in IDEM (ed.): *Plánování nemyslitelného: Československé válečné plány 1950–1990*. Praha, Dokořán 2007.

In so doing, he convincingly demonstrates that many Western leaders' motivation in setting up and maintaining the Atlantic alliance was the fear that the wrong people would be elected to lead and, consequently, that the collective will for defence would be impaired.

A no less important question is to what extent these concerns were justified. The picture is again nuanced. While Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970) was re-elected in late 1965 in France's first instance of universal suffrage by a large margin in the second round, his decision to pull France from NATO's military structures in March 1966 was not universally popular. After the announcement of the withdrawal, opinion polls showed that while the plurality (40 percent) were indifferent, 38 percent opposed the decision and only 22 percent were in favour.[10]

Great numbers of protestors in the streets against deployment of American Pershing and cruise missiles in the early 1980s never translated into victories for anti-deployment parties at ballot boxes. New nukes were not the decisive issue in the 1983 elections, which helped keep pro-deployment West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (1930–2017) and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013) in power while their leftist opponents suffered historic defeats. Rather than leading to submission, the rise in tensions with Moscow tended to benefit defence-minded parties over leftist doves. The emergence of peace movements in the early 1980s thus turned out to be a reaction to a specific decision rather than a harkening of systemic crisis in the Western alliance.[11]

The majority of Western electorates did not turn against the Alliance, although they questioned some elements of the Western strategy, including the necessity to deploy additional nuclear weapons. Yet, there had been over 6,000 tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe before 1983, which did not cause a public uproar. The problem was not nuclear weapons *per se*, let alone NATO, but the deployment of new ones.

In the 1970s, it was Southern Europe that experienced a rise in communist influence and with it the possible weakening of NATO allegiance. In Spain, democratizing after Franco's death, the Ford administration warned against hasty legalization of the Communist Party and the subsequent Carter administration discouraged allowing communists' participation in the country's first democratic elections. Ultimately, however, the opinion prevailed in Spain that the elections

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[10] FOURQUET, Jérôme – KRAUS, François: La France et l'OTAN: 1966–2009. In: *Défense nationale et sécurité collective – hors-série* (May 2009), pp. 173–180, here p. 175. [Accessed 2025-11-01.] Available online at: http://www.irsem.fr/storage/file_manager_files/2025/03/cahier-70e-anniversaire-2009.pdf?utm.

[11] JOFFE, Josef: *The Limited Partnership: Europe, the United States and the Burdens of Alliance*. Cambridge (MA), Ballinger 1987. See also COLBOURN, Susan: *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons that Nearly Destroyed NATO*. Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press 2022.

without communist participation would lack legitimacy, and the party was fully legalized in April 1977. It received only nine percent of the vote in the June elections.[12]

In Portugal, a well-organized Communist Party was part of the first government after the overthrow of an authoritarian regime in 1974, relying in particular on strong influence in the officer corps. At the initiative of the United States, Lisbon was denied access to classified information within NATO and the country itself stopped, of its own volition, participating in some sensitive NATO meetings. U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1923–2023) fretted that the country was lost for the West and was on its way into communist arms. The elections to the Constituent Assembly on the first anniversary of the Carnation Revolution in the spring of 1975, however, did not meet these dire predictions. With an exceptionally high voter turnout of 92 percent, the communists won only 12 percent, far behind the victorious socialists with 38 percent and the centrist People's Democrats with almost 27 percent.[13]

The danger of excessive communist influence was eventually also averted in Italy, where the local communists tried to become part of the political mainstream. Their Eurocommunist leader, Enrico Berlinguer (1922–1984), even declared NATO to be a "protective shield for socialism" in Italy.[14] The communists' rhetorical moderation paid off when they won 34 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections in the summer of 1976, only four percent less than the victorious Christian Democrats and almost eight percent more than in 1968.

The Western allies subsequently made economic aid to the unstable Italian economy conditional on the absence of communists from the government. The "Reds" played ball when in August 1976, by abstention, they enabled the formation of a right-wing government, contenting themselves with the post of speaker of the lower house and the leadership of several parliamentary committees.[15]

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12 POWELL, Charles: The United States and Spain: From Franco to Juan Carlos. In: TOWNSON, Nigel (ed.): *Spain Transformed: The Late Franco Dictatorship, 1959–1975*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2007, pp. 234–255.

13 DE MELO, Daniela: Outmanoeuvring Kissinger: Role Theory, US Intra-elite Conflict, and the Portuguese Revolution. In: *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2019), p. 224–243; DEL PERO, Mario: A European Solution for a European Crisis: The International Implications of Portugal's Revolution. In: *Journal of European Integration History*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2009), pp. 15–34, here p. 26.

14 BRACKE, Maud: *Which Socialism, Whose Détente? West European Communism and the Czechoslovak Crisis, 1968*. Budapest – New York, Central European University Press 2007, Chapter 8 (Internationalism and Eurocommunism in the 1970s), p. 331 and 355 (footnote 29).

15 PONS, Silvio: Cold War Republic: The "External Constraint" in Italy during the 1970s. In: VARSORI, Antonio – ZACCARIA, Benedetto (eds.): *Italy in the International System from*

Not only in Italy, but also in the rest of Europe, the temporary appeal of the communist parties subsequently began to fade. In the French parliamentary elections of March 1978, the left-wing coalition came in significantly below expectations, just as the Italian communists did in the local elections in May.

After years of transition, Spain ultimately joined NATO in 1982 amid street protests demanding a referendum. When the referendum was finally held four years later, it resulted in 56.9 percent of valid votes in favour of remaining within NATO on a turnout of 59.4 percent.[16]

Prior to his rise to the French presidency, François Mitterrand (1916–1996) was hardly a passionate supporter of NATO. When he presided over the inclusion of the French communists in the government (1981–1984), concerns were voiced mainly from Washington over France's allegiance. Yet, while sticking to the Gaullist policy of keeping France out of NATO's integrated military structures and having marginalized the communists, Mitterrand was a staunch supporter of deployment of U.S. weapons in Europe.[17] In a landmark speech at the German Bundestag in the spring 1983, he fully threw his weight behind West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and contributed to Kohl's subsequent victory.[18]

When faced with possibly poor choices at ballot boxes and clearly also with incentives and pressure from allies, the citizens – as well as their leaders – turned out to be less fickle than feared.

Détente to the End of the Cold War. Cham (Switzerland), Palgrave Macmillan 2018, p. 50; BASOSI, Duccio – BERNARDINI, Giovanni: The Puerto Rico Summit of 1976 and the End of Eurocommunism. In: NUTI, Leopoldo (ed.): *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev*. London, Routledge 2009.

[16] 1986 Spanish NATO Membership Referendum. In: *Wikipedia* [online]. [Accessed 2025-11-16.] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1986_Spanish_NATO_membership_referendum.

[17] See, for example, SHORT, Philip: *Mitterrand: A Study in Ambiguity*. London, Random House 2013, p. 271.

[18] Discours de M. François Mitterrand, Président de la République, devant le Bundestag, à l'occasion du 20ème anniversaire du Traité de l'Élysée, sur la coopération franco-allemande, la sécurité européenne et la CEE, Bonn, jeudi 20 janvier 1983. In: *Élysée.fr* [official website of the Presidency of the French Republic] [online], 20. 01. 1983. [Accessed 2025-11-06.] Available at: https://www.elysee.fr/francois-mitterrand/1983/01/20/discours-de-m-francois-mitterrand-president-de-la-republique-devant-le-bundestag-a-loccasion-du-20eme-anniversaire-du-traite-de-lelysee-sur-la-cooperation-franco-allemande-la-securite-europeenne-et-la-cee-bonn-jeudi-20-janvier-1983.

Irrelevant Values?

In Sayle's periodization, the first post-war decade was much inspired by the experience of the Second World War and the danger of its reoccurrence. This era came to a grinding halt in the mid-1950s when, after the first *détente* following Stalin's death and in "the spirit of Geneva", the main task became to keep the alliance together. In other words, the primacy of preparing for external threats was increasingly supplanted by the now perennial challenge of holding the alliance together. This was compounded in the 1970s by *détente* and the question of who would foot the bill for common defence. The last Cold War decade was then fraught with a growing chasm between European domestic opinion and NATO's continuing reliance on nuclear weapons.

According to earlier accounts and conventional wisdom, NATO owed its longevity mainly to the shared democratic values of its allies. Sayle, however, dismisses the *communiqué*'s language on Atlantic values as misleading and even outright dishonest. There is no gainsaying that the values framework was crucial in the late 1940s in bringing to an end 150 years of U.S. reluctance to sign up for what George Washington called "entangling alliances".

The initial impetus for the creation of a political and security bond between Europe and the United States did not come primarily from Washington, but from Europe. The European endeavour for an entangling alliance with the United States initially appeared more like wishful thinking than a realistic option. An important condition for the success of the European effort to create a transatlantic alliance was the acceptance of a framework of shared values. Only after leading representatives of both the Democratic and Republican parties accepted the idea of a Euro-Atlantic community as part of Washington's foreign policy identity could the United States voluntarily end its long tradition of non-alignment in Europe.[19] The founding of NATO was the result of a fortunate combination of democratic vision and pragmatism, grounded in values: the member states joined together to ensure "the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law", as stated in the preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949.[20]

As Sayle writes, following the Berlin and Cuban missile crises the Alliance lost its virginity and "the language of Atlanticism had lost its resonance on both

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[19] See KAPLAN, Lawrence S.: *NATO 1948: The Birth of the Transatlantic Alliance*. Lanham (MD), Rowman & Littlefield 2007, p. 223.

[20] The North Atlantic Treaty. In: *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* [online], 04. 04. 1949. [Accessed 2025-11-03.] Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

sides of the Atlantic" (p. 99). From then on, apparently, allied attitudes were less based on the "Atlantic mystique" and more on hard-nosed national interest.

A year before the expiry of the Washington Treaty, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 underscored even among the doubtful the need for NATO, now more healthily based on national interest rather than the overtaken tropes of Atlanticism. The United States openly used the crisis to remind the Europeans of their own responsibility and the need for fairer burden sharing within a NATO treaty now extended for an indefinite period.

Yet, while far from always being a harmonious polity, the combination of not only interests, but also values, was the driving force behind the Western community's perennial efforts to create the multilateral security architecture and the sense of mission to lead. This was clear (if not always stated, as Sayle rightly says) during the Cold War when the juxtaposition to Soviet totalitarianism reinforced the sense of historical vocation for maintaining global peace, stability and prosperity.

NATO emerged from the Cold War as a values-based alliance and adherence to these values was among the key conditions for inviting new members after the Cold War, as stated explicitly in the alliance's September 1995 "Study on NATO Enlargement".[21] With areas of transatlantic disputes persisting and even expanding after the Cold War, the community of values, interests and sense of mission provided – until recently – legitimacy for the ultimately failed aspirations to create a true international liberal order. Without them, the future of this unique community hangs in balance – just as it did in the past. It might precisely be the explicit abandonment of values that could lead to the demise of the alliance on our watch.

Crises

Sayle's account is particularly illuminating in describing Allied disagreements, tensions and crises. Reorientation of NATO's strategy towards nuclear weapons was largely due to the reluctance of European leaders to foot the bill, in particular after Stalin's death when spending on guns rather than butter seemed frivolous. Nonetheless, the reliance on nuclear weapons had its own challenges for the alliance. Although the number of nuclear weapons in Europe grew, ultimately making the Old Continent the most nuclearized part of the world, until the end

[21] Study on NATO Enlargement. In: *North Atlantic Treaty Organization On-line Library* [online], September 1995, updated 27. 01. 2000. [Accessed 2025-11-03.] Available at: https://www.nato.int/docu/basictxt/enl-9501.htm.

of the Cold War, NATO Allies never fully agreed on the circumstances that would call for the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Despite the aftertaste left behind from NATO's many crises, the alliance's recovery time was remarkably short. In the wake of the Suez crisis debacle in 1956, when the United States voted against France and the United Kingdom in the United Nations, recovery was also thanks to the U.S. readiness to mend the alliance.

In one of the best parts of his volume, Sayle demonstrates that the unequal relationship between the U.S. and its allies gained prominence especially during the Berlin crisis when Washington used NATO as an instrument of its own policy rather than a forum to formulate common policy with allies. Despite the lip service paid to common strategy, NATO was hardly more than an appendix to the U.S. policy during the crisis. The military plans for defence of West Berlin, code-names LIVE OAK, were drafted outside NATO by U.S., U.K. and French planners. Similarly, substantial political consultations on the ongoing crisis were also held mainly among the three.

Even among these three protagonists, harmony was limited. The Brits notably never subscribed to the LIVE OAK plans: Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (1894–1986) considered the U.S.-driven plans overly aggressive, while the British command saw them as "dangerous military nonsense" (p. 80). The Bonn Republic, when briefed about the military plans which would turn Germany into the main battlefield of the next war in the European theatre, pushed for alternative scenarios such as maritime blockade. The controversy faded only with the end of the Berlin crisis.

Sayle is right on the mark that of all NATO crises – both past and future – the most serious and threatening were those that concerned domestic politics. So, the shock of Charles de Gaulle's withdrawal from the integrated military command was managed mainly due to President Lyndon B. Johnson's decision, taken against the advice of some of his advisers, not to escalate. De Gaulle's own decision, in addition, not to test the limits of independence and not to follow with a withdrawal from NATO, made it possible for NATO to seal the new, flexible response doctrine (without France) and agree (with France's grudging approval) the 1967 Harmel report setting the policy of maintaining adequate defence while promoting political *détente*.

The "offset crisis" in the second half of the 1960s, which concerned the West German government compensating the presence of U.S. and British troops on its territory by buying American and British weapons, was arguably much deeper and threatening because of rising isolationist moods in the U.S. Congress. Amid threats of the United States drastically reducing its presence in Europe, only a last-minute compromise garnered through protracted negotiations helped avoid collapse of the alliance. Bad blood remained as a potentially fateful debate was taking place outside of NATO with other allies relegated to the sidelines.

For the rest of the Cold War, European and Canadian allies struggled to maintain adequate defence spending and concentrated on avoiding drastic cutbacks just as the United States refrained from dramatically cutting the number of troops in Europe.

Keeping the Germans Down?

Sayle also argues that one of the main concerns behind the U.S. approach to Europe was linked less with the Soviet Union and more with fears that Germany would return "to the bottle", either reverting back to its past or cutting a deal with Moscow (p. 101). However, it is also important to ask whether Germany going it alone was ever a real option and whether the alliance contributed to the European order by "keeping the Germans down".

The core issue of the German question during the Cold War was how to ensure the democratic development of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) within the Western community while simultaneously involving it in a common defence system – all with a view to the future reunification of the country.

The fundamental challenge in this process, as it turned out, was not the putative revival of Prussian militarism, as is sometimes claimed, but the deep reluctance of a significant part of West German society to build any meaningful armed forces at all.[22] The inclusion of the FRG in the alliance ten years after the war created an acceptable framework for its armament, not only for the other allies, but also for the Germans themselves. Even then, the ambitious plans of the mid-1950s envisaging a half-million-strong West German army within a few years, ran into political and economic limits and had to be significantly revised in the following decade.

The same applies to the alleged nuclear ambitions of the Federal Republic. Nuclear weapons in German hands were never entirely on the agenda not only for Washington, but also for Bonn itself, which had already made a political commitment not to pursue weapons of mass destruction when it joined the alliance in the mid-1950s. As the Soviet Union advanced in its ability to strike the United States with intercontinental ballistic missiles, doubts began to grow about the reliability of American security guarantees. In the Federal Republic, a number of Christian Democratic politicians were already calling for "more irons in the fire" in the second half of the 1950s. Notably, the leader of the Bavarian Christian Social Union (*Christlich-Soziale Union*, CSU) and federal Minister of Defence Franz Josef

[22] See SCHWARZ, Hans-Peter: *Adenauer*, Vol. 2: *Der Staatsman, 1952–1967*. Stuttgart, Deutscher Verlags-Anstalt 1991, pp. 223–591.

Strauß (1915–1988), sought, among other things, to create a joint nuclear program with France and Italy.[23]

Charles de Gaulle shelved this project after his return to the helm of France in 1958. And while the efforts of the German Gaullists to seek a stronger security bond with France, including in the nuclear area, never completely disappeared, they were unable to prevail over the cross-party Atlantic orientation in West German foreign policy.

Neither had the FRG's position on the issue of nuclear arms control and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction deviated from this framework. Bonn admittedly acceded to the "Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty" of 1963 only under pressure from the United States, signed the "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons" (NPT) of 1968 with a year's delay in 1969 and ratified it only in the mid-1970s. However, German hesitations need to be attributed to feelings of discrimination rather than hidden nuclear ambitions. Despite some alarmist interpretations,[24] the pursuit of its own nuclear weapons was not even on the periphery of the real policy of the Federal Republic.

On the other hand, Bonn did pursue, in the words of German historian Andreas Lutsch, a "policy of limited nuclear revisionism", the aim of which was to increase its own influence within the existing Western security order without undermining its foundations based on American guarantees.[25] In this spirit, the FRG was ultimately the only country to openly support the originally American project of a multilateral nuclear force in the alliance, which would have allowed the Germans to participate in nuclear deterrence but without its proverbial "finger on the trigger".

However, the project met with resistance from London and, later, disinterest from Washington itself. Bonn then settled for a so-called software solution by way of establishing nuclear planning bodies within NATO.[26] In other words, a security

[23] See BARBIER, Colette: Les négotiations franco-germano-italiennes en vue de l'établissement d'une coopération militaire nucléaire au cours des années 1956–1958. In: *Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique*, Vol. 104, No. 1–2 (1990), pp. 81–113.

[24] See for example GERZHOY, Gene: Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany's Nuclear Ambitions. In: *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Spring 2015), pp. 91–129.

[25] LUTSCH, Andreas: *Westbindung oder Gleichgewicht? Die nukleare Sicherheitspolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zwischen Atomwaffensperrvertrag und NATO-Doppelbeschluss.* Berlin, De Gruyter – Oldenbourg 2020. See also GEIGER, Tim: *Atlantiker gegen Gaullisten: Außenpolitischer Konflikt und innerparteilicher Machtkampf in der CDU/CSU 1958–1969.* München, R. Oldenbourg 2008.

[26] See PRIEST, Andrew: From Hardware to Software: The End of the MLF and the Rise of the Nuclear Planning Group. In: WENGER, Andreas – NÜNLIST, Christian – LOCHER, Anna (eds.):

(and even less nuclear) German *Sonderweg* was never seriously pursued. The point for the Western alliance was not "keeping the Germans down", but helping them stand up in seeking democratic renewal and contributing to the alliance in the interests of all its members.

NATO's Lifetime in Stories

In his 500-page volume on NATO, Peter Apps, a columnist for Reuters, covers the entire history of the alliance. His text flows like a meandering river, but his journalistic panache never really loses its current. His is a book of stories of people: towering figures such as the first NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Dwight Eisenhower (1890–1969) as well as now forgotten diplomats such as Theodore Achilles (1905–1986) or John Hickerson (1989–1989) but also a true biography of an organization with all its strengths and flaws. It can be read either as a NATO for (interested) dummies or an enlivening source of stories for academics and their students but also as a competent overview of the debates, dilemmas and decisions at the core of a trans-Atlantic alliance.

As Apps shows, the issues at the core of transatlantic debate seem to have persisted since its early days: (European) allies not putting their money where their mouth (sometimes) was, concerns of certain (American) allies acting over the heads of the others, or the ambiguous impact of emerging European unity in security and defence on the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Solutions were not always subtle. Richard Nixon's administration (1969–1974) – as both Apps and Sayle retell in gory detail – decided to nip closer European political and security cooperation in the bud by openly juxtaposing it to trans-Atlantic unity. During his ill-conceived Year of Europe in 1973, the national security advisor Henry Kissinger "used NATO to bust Europe" (Sayle, p. 9). The initial efforts at European political cooperation, seriously hamstrung by Kissinger, were thus placed in opposition to American leadership of the Western alliance.

If Sayle's book is deep and thoughtful, Apps's is broad and comprehensive, excelling in describing general circumstances, but less able in rendering more complex issues. The sheer scope of NATO occasionally leads to superficiality and errors. For example, he takes at face-value some of the early U.S. estimates of Soviet military strength set at 175 divisions (Apps, p. 43 and 93). As demonstrated by earlier academic work, these estimates ignored the extent of Soviet

Transforming NATO in the Cold War: Challenges beyond Deterrence in the 1960s. London, Routledge 2007.

post-war demobilization.[27] He also claims that Moscow dropped its intentionally rabble-rousing 1954 proposal to join NATO before submitting it to the Western allies (Apps, p. 112).[28] In reality, Moscow did in fact deliver its proposal to be, unsurprisingly, turned down by Western allies. Apps's text also betrays some rush drafting: for example, calling the Prague Spring an uprising and dating it to 1967 (p. 119).

Apps's book is exceptionally good in describing the twists and turns of NATO after the end of the Cold War, in particular its overall success in the former Yugoslavia after the initial failure to act and the ensuing tragedy. His vivid journalistic rendering of 11 September 2001 attacks as experienced at NATO headquarters is particularly captivating, especially for readers – such as the present author – who lived them through from the inside. His description of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan offers a vivid picture of the hopes and failures of the West's longest war.

Conclusion

Peter Apps devotes his initial chapter to the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine which he calls a "shot of adrenalin" for a transatlantic Alliance just reeling from almost two decades in Afghanistan. NATO has now embarked on the most massive defence buildup since the early 1950s.

Timothy Andrews Sayle ultimately sees the roots of NATO's longevity in that whenever allied leaders had to choose between the preservation of "Pax Atlantica" or following more narrow national interest, they chose the former. That certainty seems now to have been shattered in view of daunting challenges stemming from recent (and future) choices at the ballot box. While the jury is still out as to what extent the 75-year-old alliance will manage to blunt the isolationist instincts of the sitting U.S. president, its usefulness in doing so – irrespective of style and taste of its main protagonists – is beyond any doubt.

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27 See, for example, KARBER, Phillip A. – COMBS, Jerald A.: The United States, NATO, and the Soviet Threat to Western Europe: Military Estimates and Policy Options, 1945–1963. In: *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Summer 1998), pp. 399–429; DUFFIELD, John S.: The Soviet Military Threat to Western Europe: US Estimates in the 1950s and 1960s. In: *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (June 1992), pp. 208–227.

28 See ROBERTS, Geoffrey: *A Chance for Peace? The Soviet Campaign to End the Cold War, 1953–1955.* (Cold War International History Project Working Paper, No. 57.) Washington, D. C., Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 2008, pp. 30–32. Available online at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/WP57_WebFinal.pdf.

The future of NATO will inevitably depend not only on a significant material commitment to defence and political commitment to transatlantic unity but also on its external credibility, in particular *vis-à-vis* Ukraine. Comparisons between contemporary Ukraine and the post-war Federal Republic of Germany are hyperbolic, but it is still legitimate to ask whether the Ukrainian question today is not acquiring the importance of the former German question.

Were the Western alliance to fail to deliver on its defence buildup underpinned by strong transatlantic solidarity or deal with the Ukrainian question with the same seriousness and responsibility with which it once approached the German one, the future of the longest lasting and arguably most successful alliance in history will be dire.

Keywords:

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); Europe; United States; Germany; France; Great Britain; Soviet Union; Russia; Ukraine; Cold War; nuclear weapons; post-Cold War; Russo-Ukrainian War

DOI 10.51134/sod.2025.039

How to Interpret the End of the Warsaw Pact?

About the Latest Book by Mark Kramer

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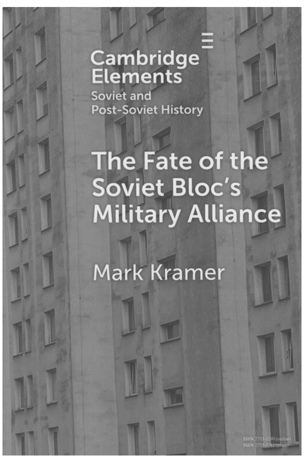

KRAMER, Mark:
The Fate of the Soviet Bloc's Military Alliance: Reform, Adaptation, and Collapse of the Warsaw Pact, 1985–1991.
(Cambridge Elements: Soviet and Post-Soviet History.) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2025, 74 pages, ISBN 978-1-009-55720-7.

Viewed retrospectively from a distance of more than thirty years, the termination of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, or Warsaw Pact, after the fall of communist power in Central and Eastern Europe does not look too surprising. In the early 1990s, however, the speed with which it was dissolved overwhelmed many observers. Nevertheless, they could only speculate about the exact reasons. Over time, some direct participants began to reveal the causes in their personal accounts. These also served as an important source for the first historians who attempted to examine the end of one of the two major Cold War alliances through a more analytical lens. A turning point in this regard was the gradual declassification of the internal documentation of former member states relating to the negotiations on the Warsaw Pact's fate during the era of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. In recent years, several academic studies have been published that contribute significantly to understanding the last years of its existence and explaining its rapid demise.[1] But one can agree with Mark Kramer, the author of the book under review, *The Fate of the Soviet Bloc's Military Alliance*, that all the existing works have specific limitations, and thus an integrated analysis of the political and military changes that led to the collapse of the Warsaw Pact is still needed. Indeed, given the sources available, the perspective of small member states has dominated most of the research to date, while the key decisions in Moscow that determined the fate of the alliance have not been adequately traced.

A View from Moscow without a Breakthrough

On this basis, Kramer – a major voice in Cold War and Eastern Bloc historiography – focuses his latest book primarily on the post-1985 Soviet decision-making process regarding the future of the Warsaw Pact. He relies largely on Soviet sources, supplemented by a few documents from other member states, namely East Germany and Czechoslovakia. What is certainly to be appreciated about the book is that it seeks to provide a view from the Eastern Bloc's centre of power. On the other hand, it does not seem to present any groundbreaking empirical findings to dramatically revise what has been written on the organization with the use of different sources. It should be noted, however, that Kramer probably did not have the opportunity to conduct systematic archival research in Moscow and had available to him only the records he had collected during his previous long professional career. Thus, the historiography is still waiting for a work based, for example, on the minutes of the special meetings of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Secretariat that preceded the Warsaw Pact summits, where the Soviet political leadership and military top brass discussed the upcoming agenda for the alliance. If these have been preserved and remain in the Moscow archives, their analysis could offer a major breakthrough.

Kramer confirms many of the earlier findings. He points out that when Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, the Warsaw Pact was still a formidable military counterweight to NATO. He also reflects on its important dimension as an effective mechanism for (authoritative) political consensus-building among member states. Similarly, he confirms that upon taking office, the new Soviet leader was interested not in loosening but in strengthening the organization. It was only the enormous challenge of trying to revitalize the Soviet

[1] BÍLÝ, Matěj: *Varšavská smlouva 1985–1991: Dezintegrace a rozpad*. Praha, Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů 2021 (English version IDEM: *The Warsaw Pact, 1985–1991: Disintegration and Dissolution*. London – New York, Routledge 2022); WETTIG, Gerhard: *Gorbatschow: Reformpolitik und Warschauer Pakt 1985–1991*. Innsbruck – Graz, Studien Verlag 2021; MILES, Simon: We All Fall Down: The Dismantling of the Warsaw Pact and the End of the Cold War in Eastern Europe. In: *International Security,* Vol. 48, No. 3 (2023), pp. 51–85; BÉKÉS, Csaba: Hungary and the Dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (1988–1991). In: *Journal of Cold War Studies,* Vol. 25, No. 4 (2023), pp. 4–23.

economy, Kramer explains, that prompted Gorbachev to adjust Moscow's policy toward the Eastern Bloc, with far-reaching implications for the Warsaw Pact. The last Soviet leader thus plays a key role throughout the text, which is perfectly understandable given his crucial involvement in adopting new policies with profound consequences.

The most notable contribution of the book is evident in two areas. First, it shows well the significance of Gorbachev's speech at the United Nations in December 1988, announcing, among other things, a unilateral and unconditional withdrawal of part of the Soviet troops with their armaments stationed on the territory of the Warsaw Pact countries in Central Europe. It was neither an empty political gesture nor a cosmetic cut, but a decision with dramatic military consequences. This moment has been generally underrated as a milestone in ending the Cold War. Second, Kramer follows up on his earlier research into discussions within the Kremlin leadership in the spring of 1989 about the conditions under which the Soviet Union would provide military assistance to its allies. This is the key part of the book, although some of the conclusions have been published before.[2] It is revealed that Gorbachev and his reform-minded associates feared that the Soviet Union's existing alliances could serve as a potential ground for military intervention to save the crisis-ridden communist power in the Eastern Bloc. From the reformists' perspective, Kramer shows, the source of concern was not so much the Warsaw Pact but rather the bilateral treaties that Moscow had concluded with states in its sphere of interest in Europe since the 1940s. It is an incentive for further research on the relatively underestimated bilateral pillar of the Soviet alliance system in Europe, which remains overshadowed in the historiography by the multilateral framework of the Warsaw Pact. The significance of these treaties is well illustrated by the fact that the post-1989 non-communist leaders in the Warsaw Pact states considered their revision as similarly important a task as the organization's dissolution.[3] Although Kramer deals with this episode only in passing, he goes further than most authors, who usually overlook it completely. He uses the entire discussion primarily to show that in March 1989 the Soviet leadership clearly ruled out military intervention in the allied countries even if the communist monopoly on power was jeopardized.

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2 KRAMER, Mark: The Demise of the Soviet Bloc. In: *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (2011), pp. 788–854.

3 BÍLÝ, Matěj: Redefining Alliances: The USSR-Central Europe Negotiations on Bilateral Treaties at the Cold War's End. (Article accepted for publication in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2025.)

Overlooked Perspectives

On the other hand, Kramer's approach has certain limitations. Since the book is written primarily through a Soviet lens, the smaller member states mostly disappear from the story. While Kramer does not resurrect the "satellite" paradigm (clearly opposing it, p. 53), he largely fails to reflect on their policies toward the alliance in the first five years of Gorbachev's rule. Only after 1989 do they emerge as autonomous actors. This sometimes results in questionable conclusions that are at odds with the perspective offered by a deeper analysis of the Soviet allies' policies. For example, Kramer argues that East German leader Erich Honecker was "stunned and dismayed" (p. 32) by the unilateral military reduction initiated by Gorbachev in 1988. In contrast, the existing literature shows that disarmament and defense cuts were probably the only field in which the positions of Gorbachev and the orthodox communist leaders in the allied countries did not differ in the late 1980s.[4] Moreover, the non-Soviet member states are treated as a too homogeneous entity. But their interests and assertiveness in pursuing them differed dramatically in the examined period. This was one of the most important factors in the loss of the Warsaw Pact's cohesion.

The book's introduction contains a comprehensive summary of the existing literature on the Warsaw Pact. In the text itself, however, Kramer uses it only sporadically; he follows the *ad fontes* approach, and if literature is referred to, it is mainly his previous works. Thus, some of the debates and issues resonating in historiography are absent in the book. One can state two examples. The first is the dispute over whether Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu urged the Warsaw Pact to take *military* action in the summer of 1989 to support the Polish communists against the election-winning Solidarity. Kramer does not seem to doubt this, although other academic studies and the published personal accounts are more reticent in this respect.[5] In fact, Ceaușescu's calls can also be interpreted as an attempt to use collective pressure by the member states to establish a "national unity government" in Poland, in which communists and security forces would keep key positions and marginalize the opposition's influence.[6] As the Romanian

[4] SCHAEFER, Bernd: The GDR in the Warsaw Pact. In: *Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security* [online], 2007. [Accessed 2025-02-27.] Available at: http://www.php.isn.ethz.ch/lory1.ethz.ch/collections/coll_gdr/intro2644.html?navinfo=44755.

[5] Kramer has presented the thesis before, sparking discussion in the academic community. Continuing Debate: Ceauşescu's Appeal for Joint Warsaw Pact Action on 19 August 1989. In: *Wilson Center* [online], 2015. [Accessed 2025-02-27.] Available at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/continuing-debate-ceausescus-appeal-for-joint-warsaw-pact-action-19-august-1989.

[6] NOWAK, Jerzy: *Od hegemonii do agonii: Upadek Układu Warszawskiego – polska perspektywa.* Warszawa, Bellona 2011, p. 167.

historiography reveals, Bucharest also assured Moscow that the aim was not to launch a military intervention, but only to discuss on an alliance basis how to help the Polish comrades in their "war for socialist development" in the country.[7] Second, Kramer does not reflect on the problem of the language Gorbachev used in talks with his counterparts from the allied countries. As Gorbachev's biographer William Taubman points out, it was an ideological language that was not always clear and allowed for different interpretations. It is somewhat paradoxical that Kramer emphasizes in Gorbachev's words before 1988 the same dimension that hardliners in the Eastern Bloc, according to Taubman, took away from their meetings with the Kremlin leader, particularly phrases evocative of the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine. But these might be, Taubman notes, merely the tactical virtue of reassuring conservative comrades.[8]

Another limitation of the publication is its brevity. Despite being a book, with a main text of 54 pages, it should be seen as a comprehensive study rather than a monograph. Although it covers a period of only six years, these were extremely dynamic and eventful. As a result, many aspects are explained in overly brief manner. This is particularly the case in the chapters "The Dissolution of East European Communism" and "Disbandment of the Warsaw Pact". The latter, in particular, does not bring much new empirical data or interpretations in its six pages. Above all, the fundamental question of why the Gorbachev leadership did not more assertively defend the survival of the organization after 1989, despite this being initially their clear and acknowledged goal, remains to be answered by future research.

Issues in Need of Further Discussion

Despite some limitations, Kramer's book will certainly find its place in the literature on the Warsaw Pact. More importantly, some of Kramer's interpretations are fertile ground for discussion. This review focuses on four issues. Did Gorbachev's policy towards the Warsaw Pact become innovative as late as 1988? Was the Warsaw Pact primarily an instrument for keeping "orthodox" communist regimes in power in member states? When did the Brezhnev Doctrine of the limited sovereignty of socialist countries effectively end? Why did the main proponents

[7] RETEGAN, Mihai: Reżim Ceauşescu a zmiany w Polsce: Lato 1989 roku. In: MACHCEWICZ, Paweł (ed.): *Polska 1986–1989: Koniec systemu*, Vol. 1. Warszawa, Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Adademii Nauk 2002, pp. 176–181, here p. 180.

[8] TAUBMAN, William: *Gorbachev: His Life and Times.* New York – London, Simon & Schuster 2017, pp. 287–288.

of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in the early 1990s abandon their original idea of replacing it with a pan-European security system?

First, Kramer believes that, before 1988, Gorbachev did not differ much from previous Kremlin leaders in his policy toward the Warsaw Pact. This is documented by his selected words regarding the relations between European socialist states and the role of the organization in them. The author highlights Gorbachev's call for "strengthening the unity", countering "any centrifugal tendencies", "increasingly close cooperation", and "obligatory consideration not only for its own interests but also for common interests". It is not only the extent to which this interpretation ignores the aforementioned nature of Gorbachev's language stressed by Taubman. The thin book leaves no room to consider other aspects of Gorbachev's words before 1988. In particular, Kramer concludes that the goals of the June 1986 document "On Topical Questions Regarding Collaboration with Socialist Countries"[9] was fully consistent with earlier Kremlin policies. But a closer reading reveals that the memorandum was highly critical of the past, acknowledging that relations between socialist countries had lacked sincerity, frankness, and trust and that multilateral mechanisms were often formal in nature. In the document, Gorbachev not only called for an entirely different form of collaboration (although he justified it in ideological terms by mentioning the changing international situation), but even noted that "for objective reasons, a period of change in leadership is taking place" in the allied countries. The book also fails to mention that Gorbachev, upon taking office, encouraged the Warsaw Pact members to act more actively and independently in their foreign policies, intending to make the organization an effective coordinating platform in this regard. Changes in the alliance's political structures indicate that these were not entirely empty words. For the first time in three decades, they began to meet regularly, and new consultative bodies were established, including several expert groups and the Multilateral Group on Current Mutual Information.

The question is whether Gorbachev remained conservative on the Warsaw Pact for as long as Kramer suggests. At a meeting with members of the allied Committee of Ministers of Foreign Affairs in March 1987, for example, he stated that the member states were governed by "sufficiently mature" parties, which Moscow respected and additionally refused to continue to play a leading role, albeit logically it would always occupy a special position in the socialist community. He stressed that cooperation would now be restricted to political and

[9] An English translation is available online: Memorandum from Mikhail Gorbachev to the CC CPSU Politburo on Topical Questions Regarding Collaboration with Socialist Countries, June 26, 1986. In: *National Security Archive* [online]. [Accessed 2025-02-27.] Available at: https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28330-document-10-memorandum-mikhail-gorbachev-cc-cpsu-politburo-topical-questions.

ideological matters. The military aspects were clearly to be put aside. But he also threatened that "the one who will not embrace the change and will remain satisfied in their own dominion, is the one who will be wiped out by perestroika".[10] Indeed, Gorbachev's aforementioned ambiguity and the limits of his thinking were manifested at the same time. In one breath, he warned that "imperialism" saw *perestroika* as an opportunity to escalate anti-communist sentiments, words clearly evoking the language of the past. This is an ambiguity that must be kept in mind when studying the Gorbachev period. Recent research, however, shows that the shift in the Soviet leader's rhetoric was evident even to the not-so-reform-minded communists who, long before 1988, had begun to see his policies as a potential threat to their position, and sought alternatives.[11]

Second, Kramer sees the Warsaw Pact as an instrument of "keeping orthodox communist regimes in power" in the member states. In his view, this was the alliance's main *raison d'être*. Accordingly, the organization's rapid disintegration is largely explained by the fact that this mission disappeared after 1989. The thesis seems questionable as it ignores the factor of a sense of possible external threat, e.g. from Germany, which was apparently authentic for the communist leaders of many member states and, at least in the case of Poland, survived 1989 for a while. The Warsaw Pact is usually associated with the 1968 military suppression of the Prague Spring, but the operation was not, in fact, officially sanctioned by the alliance.[12] If the Brezhnev leadership had understood the organization in the way that Kramer does, it probably would not have consistently tried to prevent domestic issues and disputes between member states from being discussed in the Pact's bodies from the early 1970s. This was also largely the case during the Polish crisis in 1980/1981.[13]

This certainly does not mean that the Kremlin completely abandoned the idea of military interventions in its European sphere of influence after 1968. But for

[10] *Národní archiv* [The National Archives of the Czech Republic], Prague, fond [collection] Předsednictvo ÚV KSČ 1986–1989 [Presidency of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia 1986–1989], svazek [fascicle] P32/87, bod [point] 1, Záznam z přijetí ministrů zahraničních věcí zemí Varšavské smlouvy s. Gorbačovem [Record of the Reception of the Foreign Ministers of the Warsaw Pact Countries by Comrade Gorbachev], 30. 3. 1987.

[11] VOJTĚCHOVSKÝ, Ondřej – PELIKÁN, Jan: *V čase odkvétání: Československo a Jugoslávie v období pozdního socialismu, 1969–1989*. Praha, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy 2021, pp. 216, 224–225.

[12] BÍLÝ, Matěj: Konec neslavného spojenectví: Varšavská smlouva zanikla před třiceti lety, její vnímání je stále ovlivněno mnoha mýty. In: *Paměť a dějiny,* Vol. 15, No. 2 (2021), pp. 116–124, here pp. 116–117.

[13] IDEM: *The Warsaw Pact, 1969–1985: The Pinnacle and Path to Dissolution.* Washington, Academica 2020, pp. 113, 415.

such an eventuality Moscow probably intended to use other, less official mechanisms. In fact, the Warsaw Pact founding charter did not allow such a practice "on paper", referring to the principles of the United Nations Charter, including sovereignty and the inviolability of borders. Paradoxically, in the aforementioned section of the book dealing with the discussion within the Soviet leadership in the spring of 1989 about possible military assistance to the allies, Kramer reveals that the bilateral treaties between the Eastern Bloc countries, especially those of the Soviet Union with Czechoslovakia and East Germany, provided the most viable legal framework to justify such an intervention. This was apparently noted even by the new non-communist governments in Central Europe in early 1990. Czechoslovak diplomacy, for example, identified the revision of the document as equally important as negotiating the withdrawal of the Soviet troops. In fact, the Warsaw Pact's founding charter was seen as a possible model for a new bilateral treaty because, in the Czechoslovak view, it respected the principles of international law.[14]

The fact that the available documents are silent on the idea of the Warsaw Pact being seen by its leaders primarily as a guarantee of the survival of communist power in the member states after the Polish crisis, is also supported by the retrospective testimony of Miloš Jakeš. In 2017, the former party leader of Czechoslovakia, who was known for his hardline statements and stances, did not deny that a military solution had been a possibility in 1989. However, according to him, this depended on the willingness of individual party leaderships to resort to the use of force to suppress opposition, not on the Warsaw Pact agreements. He believed that the first such decision could have triggered a domino effect throughout the Eastern Bloc, but on a domestic rather than a multilateral basis. Jakeš, surprisingly lucid, factual and outspoken, claimed that he had noticed no serious tendencies to use the Warsaw Pact alliance in this way in the late 1980s.[15]

Third, related to this perception of the Warsaw Pact is the question of when the Brezhnev Doctrine effectively ended. The book disagrees with the interpretation that this moment was the Soviet refusal to intervene militarily in Poland in the early 1980s, and especially the Kremlin's unambiguous message to Polish leader Wojciech Jaruzelski in December 1981 that sending foreign troops was

[14] *Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta republiky* [The Archive of the Office of the President of the Czech Republic], Prague, složka [fascicle] VH 1990, 26.–27. 2. SSSR, Moskva, Smlouva o přátelství, spolupráci a vzájemné pomoci mezi ČSSR a SSSR [USSR, Moscow, Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the Czechoslovakia and the USSR], 14. 2. 1990.

[15] Interview with Miloš Jakeš conducted by the author, 28 March 2017. Author's personal archive.

completely ruled out.[16] On the contrary, Kramer believes that Moscow would reconsider its position if the Polish operation to suppress the opposition failed and a civil war erupted in the country, endangering Soviet military units there. Thus, he considers the debate in the Soviet leadership in March 1989 and the adoption of a secret resolution dismissing the sending of troops to save the communist power in the Eastern Bloc that was threatened by an internal crisis as the real turning point. The question is whether this was not merely a confirmation of a long-standing policy. Was not the main change primarily that in 1989, Gorbachev began to speak publicly about the fact that the social and political order in individual countries had changed in the past and could change in the future while emphasizing the universal right of the people themselves to make such choice?[17] As historian Simon Miles notes, it was not so important whether the Kremlin leadership actually buried the Brezhnev Doctrine in the midst of the Polish events, but whether the outside world believed that it was still valid.[18]

Fourth, any analysis of the negotiations on the Warsaw Pact's future in 1990 and 1991 inevitably touches upon shaping the post-Cold War international order. An important aspect of this is the turn taken by the states of the emerging Visegrad Group toward a new security architecture in Europe. As Kramer notes, they were initially allured by the prospect of a pan-European security organization to replace the alliances of the bipolar era, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The reason they abandoned the vision in late 1990, he argues, is that there was no real pan-European military force to replace the aforementioned organizations (pp. 46–47). But this is not the complete story. A closer look at Czechoslovak, Hungarian, and Polish documents declassified in recent years reveals that Central European leaders abandoned the idea mainly because it lacked support from key actors, especially the Western powers. If pursued consistently, the issue had the potential to complicate relations with the West, which was anything but desirable for the non-communist Central European governments. Moreover, the preference for a pan-European solution was not much different from Moscow's position at

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16 MASTNY, Vojtech: The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland in 1980–1981 and the End of the Cold War. In: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (1999), pp. 189–211, here p. 204; ZUBOK, Vladislav: *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press 2007, p. 270; MILES, Simon: *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War*. New York, Cornell University Press 2020, p. 52; BÍLÝ, M.: *The Warsaw Pact 1969–1985,* p. 482.

17 Address by Mikhail Gorbachev to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, 6 July 1989. In: SAVRANSKAYA, Svetlana – BLANTON, Thomas – ZUBOK, Vladislav (eds.): *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989*. Budapest – New York, Central European University Press 2010, pp. 492–496 (document 73).

18 MILES, S.: *Engaging the Evil Empire*, pp. 52–53.

the time, which was unsuitable for Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, given their geopolitical reorientation toward the West. Thus, in the fall of 1990, their governments began to support a solution that left the countries temporarily without security guarantees but, at the same time, opened the way for their successful integration into the Western security system in the long term.

This article was funded by the Czech Science Foundation as part of the No. 24-10150S grant at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

Keywords:

international relations; Cold War; post-Cold War; Eastern Bloc; Visegrad Group; Warsaw Pact; North Atlantic Treaty Organizations (NATO); Soviet Union; Mikhail Gorbachev; Russia; United States

DOI 10.51134/sod.2025.015

“Informers” – between Victimhood and Guilt?

Foreign Authors on State Security Collaborators and the Limits of Interpretation

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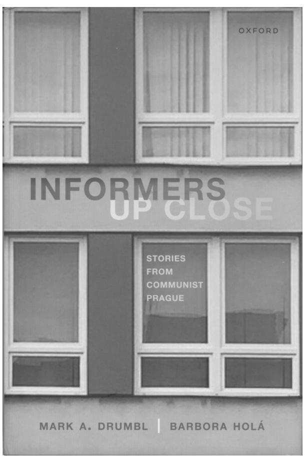

DRUMBL, Mark A. – HOLÁ, Barbora:
Informers Up Close: Stories from Communist Prague.
Oxford, Oxford University Press 2024, 252 pages,
ISBN 978-0-19-285513-8.

The year 2024 saw the publication of a unique foreign monograph dedicated to the world of the Czechoslovak State Security’s (*Státní bezpečnost*, StB) secret collaborators. A secret collaborator is an issue of great social interest in Czech history as well as in the present time. Despite several works that can be related to the issue,[1] an analysis of collaboration, its motives and the relationship between “informers” and the StB members still remains largely an unfulfilled task. Still, there are several studies that do focus on the issue of secret collaborators.[2] It is

[1] See mainly BÁRTA, Milan (ed.): *Člověk v soukolí StB*. Praha, Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů 2020. However, even this collective monograph is a body of case studies rather than an analysis of the world of secret collaborators.

[2] BÍLEK, Libor: Zavazuji se dobrovolně… Rezidenti, agenti, informátoři a další: Tajní spolupracovníci Státní bezpečnosti v letech 1945–1989. In: *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015), pp. 4–19; CORNWALL, Mark: *Tracking the Informer Network of the Czechoslovak Security Police (StB).* Unpublished paper, author’s personal archive, 2025.

certainly noteworthy that the issue has been chosen as a theme of a monograph by two academics working abroad, even though Barbora Holá is originally from the Czech Republic. And what is more, the two authors are not graduates in history, but in law, while Canadian Mark Drumbl is also a graduate in political sciences. In the long term, both are professionally interested in issues of international law, war crimes and mass violence, human rights, the search for justice in the transition from dictatorship to democracy, and the process of coming to terms with a traumatic past (transitional justice). Drumbl is currently director of the Transnational Law Institute at the School of Law at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, USA. Holá is a professor in the Department of Criminal Law and Criminology of the Faculty of Law at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and a researcher at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (*Nederlands Studiecentrum voor Criminaliteit en Rechtshandhaving*). The book itself may therefore become the object of examination. How have these undoubtedly reputable authors managed to grasp the issue despite living outside the country whose recent history they deal with and despite not being historians and not having dealt with this issue in the past? Will their conclusions be of any relevance? Their work will therefore also be a test of the epistemological possibilities and limits of research into the issue.

The book deals with the question of “informers”, in Czech literally *informátoři*, during the period of communist Czechoslovakia. However, the usual term used in the context of the State Security is “secret collaborator” (*tajný spolupracovník*). The term “informer” (*informátor*) had another, specific meaning. Until 1972, it was used for one of the categories of secret collaborators of StB counter-intelligence. After that year it was no longer used as part of its terminology.[3] The authors apply the term “informer” to a “common/ordinary citizen” (*běžný občan*), who collects information and subsequently passes it on to the authorities, usually in secret. They also define this category as different from an open “collaborator” (*kolaborant*) and the more sophisticated and professional “spy” (*špión*) (p. 3). In the context of secret collaboration with the State Security, the very definition of “common/ordinary citizen” (*běžný občan*) seems to make no sense, given that the “secret collaborator” (*tajný spolupracovník*) was supposed to comply with certain special criteria corresponding to the desired aims of the agency network.[4] The arbitrary treatment of terminology is one of the book’s shortcomings.

[3] Směrnice pro agenturně operativní práci Státní bezpečnosti z 16. 5. 1962 [Directive on the Operational Work of Agents of the State Security of 16 May 1962]. In: *Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů – Rozkazy a směrnice* [online]. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: https://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/rozkazy/smernice/rmv_13_1962.pdf.

[4] Směrnice pro práci se spolupracovníky kontrarozvědky (A-oper-I-3) z 25. 1. 1978 [Directive for Those Cooperating with Counterintelligence (A-oper-I-3) of 25 January 1978]. In: *Ibidem*

Judging by the subtitle *Stories from Communist Prague*, this should in the first place be virtually an extensive case study based on the Czechoslovak sources from a certain period (p. 7). Nevertheless, right at the beginning, the authors also state two other extensive and widely different aims. Firstly, there is the surprising ambition of formulating generally valid conclusions about the extremely interesting phenomenon of "informer" as an individual type or actor – regardless of any specific kind of regime that the informer serves – with the main goal of defining the motives of his or her actions. However, in order to search for such a universal response, it would be necessary to explore not only the Czechoslovak State Security sources, but naturally, and at least to the same extent, also similar sources and practices of, for example, some liberal democracy. Informers have of course sparked interest for centuries. The term has a mostly negative content, related to the betrayal of ideals or trust and/or greed. Yet, sometimes informers can be also seen in a positive sense, such as in the case of "whistle-blowers", that is, someone reporting in the interest of the general good (p. 1). On the other hand, even "informers" of the secret services in oppressive regimes may have subjectively positive motives. The authors' goal is to present this so far neglected phenomenon in academic work, yet right at the outset they abandon any attempts to describe its mechanisms. Their intention is to focus on understanding the motives of acts and the related emotions of "informers". They also feel the need to deal with the limits between "us" and "them", between actors and victims, between voluntary acts and coercion. These limits are relativized by the authors *a priori* as permeable.

However, Drumbl and Holá also have another aim, which is clearly related to their previous research. This aim is to explore the position of "informers" during the process of transitional justice. The authors are therefore interested in the further fate of the phenomenon of "informers" of the Czechoslovak StB even after the system organized by the secret police came to its end. They claim *a priori* that a politicized, negative view of "informers" does not correspond to reality and that an academic analysis should offer a more balanced view. As an example of victimization of "informers", however, they cite the case of the alleged denouncement of Miroslav Dvořáček by the writer Milan Kundera in the early 1950s (p. 6). The case was widely publicized (but not fully clarified) and given the gravity of its social consequences it may seem at first to represent a solid and comprehensive example. However, this is again a point where we encounter the authors' methodological fumbling. Based on published data, Milan Kundera was not a regular (recruited) "informer", in the sense of being an StB

[online]. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: https://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/rozkazy/smernice/rmv_3_1978.pdf.

secret collaborator, but at most a one-time informer who in this case came into contact only with the uniformed Public Security (*Veřejná bezpečnost*, VB) officers.[5]

What seems to have attracted the authors most was the seemingly great potential of the sources contained in the State Security files. They admit that for them, “facts” matter less (!) than “what can inductively and indicatively be traced” (p. 13). Work with these sources clearly requires a critical approach. Nonetheless, the authors are interested in the “spirit of the source”, which is supposed to record communication between an “informer” and a recipient of the information (StB member). The problem is that this communication was recorded and interpreted by a member of the repressive apparatus. To consider State Security files to be a faithful record of communication is greatly misleading, because the perspectives and strategies of both sides were usually substantially different. The files, quite logically, do not contain the directly recorded authentic perspective of an “informer”. Even the authors themselves express their doubts about the StB sources, which critics consider to be incomplete, untrustworthy and imprecise (p. 12).[6]

The second chapter provides the historical context of the development of the State Security, its structures and its place in the system of governance and is clearly intended for a foreign reader. Despite being quite accurate, it nevertheless contains some distortions, as well as occasional mistakes. To give one example, it is not clear how the authors arrived at the questionable claim that normalization lasted until 1988 when students clashed with the security forces at the Lennon wall in Prague (p. 35). The year 1968 in Czechoslovakia is characterized by the authors as the culmination of the liberalization development of the 1960s and as an attempt at reform by the governing communist party. The enforced deployment of Soviet units after the crash of the Prague Spring, which subsequently helped to create the normalization atmosphere, is omitted by the authors. However, they do note that the experience with communism in Czechoslovakia was not a foreign element of post-war social development and in general evaluate this period as participative dictatorship. The resulting image of the State Security is therefore an oversimplification. For example, their narrative seems to suggest that until the early 1950s, the building of this institution was

[5] See HRADILEK, Adam – TICHÝ, Martin: Osudová mise Moravcova kurýra: Příběh plukovníka letectva ve výslužbě Miroslava Dvořáčka. In: *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), pp. 72–85.

[6] See KŘEN, Jan: Dokumenty StB jako pramen poznání minulosti. In: *Soudobé dějiny,* Vol. 12, No. 3–4 (2005), pp. 708–733; IDEM: Historky StB a paměť. In: *Ibidem,* Vol. 13, No. 1–2 (2006), pp. 243–265. The second contribution was part of the journal discussion “Concerning the Archives of the StB and History Ethics”.

mostly accompanied by failures, fumbling and incompetence. Yet, we should not forget, for example, its successful infiltration into non-communist political parties before February 1948 or successful provocations, such as "action Scout" (*akce „Skaut"*).[7] For the authors, the then society was basically passive, resigned and satisfied. However, they also describe a strange fear reigning in this allegedly satisfied society. On the one hand, "the [Czechoslovak] regime typically had to secure its (slender/transient/fragile) legitimacy through complex forms of negotiation and persuasion rather than relying on straightforward societal obedience toward police and governmental authority" (p. 25). However, at the same time, "StB members and their informers infiltrated all parts of society from embassies to offices, schools, and sports clubs. The StB crafted a dense surveillance network and thereby curried betrayal, mistrust, fear, phlegmatism, and cynicism throughout society; the StB was simultaneously 'nowhere and everywhere'. It stewed and brewed unease by turning citizens against citizens; loyalties frayed and individuals pettily looked out for themselves." (pp. 50–51)

There is a clear ongoing effort throughout the text to blur the lines between the actors. The two authors claim that the motives people had for collaborating were diverse. By collaborating they entered a space (whether consciously or not) which allowed them the opportunity to rise professionally and socially and to gain certain advantages. In this way they show that people had a choice and could act autonomously. At the same time, they construe this normality against the backdrop of an absurd and obscure system of collaboration, created to exploit people. The authors also contrast this variable space, interwoven by individual paths, with a narrative of heroism and betrayal, which, they claim, remains dominant in the Czech Republic with regard to the past. Although the theme of the book evolves around betrayal, the authors also observe that at the same time people satisfied their needs, and that this was done in a much more colourful and independent way than in the simple black-and-white terms that the past is presented in today (p. 66).

The third chapter deals with the issue of coming to terms and settling accounts with "informers" and the communist past. Drumbl and Holá list not only the "velvety" way of handing over power, social exclusion of culprits and lustrations, revealing of the tabooed past and transparency in making it public, but also rehabilitation and property restitution, the creation of memory institutes and changes in the public space (renaming of streets and squares and the removal of monuments). The authors emphasize (sometimes repeatedly) that for Václav

[7] See SVOBODA, Petr: *Odboj, nebo provokace? Provokace StB prováděné proti třetímu odboji v rámci akce „Skaut" na příkladu skupiny „Za svobodu" v letech 1948–1951.* Praha, Academia 2020.

Havel, guilt and responsibility for communist conditions represented a moral category in principle affecting all people (pp. 4, 69, 204, 221). Nonetheless, what they probably do not know is that in the early 1990s, Havel himself as President had his share in wild lustrations and that he even described StB secret collaborators as "an ulcer which must be cut open and removed, no matter how much it hurts".[8] He was also involved in the case of the Vienna mayor Helmut Zilk (1927–2008), to whom he refused to award a state decoration on the grounds that Zilk had been a secret collaborator of Czechoslovak intelligence. Only later did it emerge that the case was much more complex and Havel eventually apologized to Zilk.[9] Nevertheless, the authors only mention the fact that Havel denounced the Lustration Act, vetoing it in 1995 and 2000 as President (p. 75).

Ostracization of secret collaborators was part of an inevitable development of society. Lustrations were to represent a way of coming to terms with the past in a situation where the communist party could not be banned. Lustrations were meant to free the politics and state administration of "old structures", and economic transformation was also meant to exclude them from playing any major role in the economy. However, it was naive to expect this to succeed.[10] The problem is that the authors perceive the process of transitional justice statically and their insight into the historical development of Czechoslovakia is only superficial. This leads to erroneous conclusions relating to this comprehensive and long period.

Another thing not sufficiently taken into account by the authors is the entire development of transitional justice. The possible abolition of the Lustration Act at the present time could have a certain symbolic value, but it would lack virtually any significance. During 2024, that is, thirty-three years after the adoption of Act No. 451/1991 Coll., only 699 people were subjected to lustration, resulting in only seven positive lustration certificates.[11] Most of the lustration petitions and a higher number of positive lustration certificates occurred in the years immediately after the Act came into effect. Moreover, the number of people in

[8] SUK, Jiří: Prezident Václav Havel a břemeno (komunistické) minulosti: Lustrace jako politický a morální problém 1989–1992. In: GJURIČOVÁ, Adéla – KOPEČEK, Michal – ROUBAL, Petr – SUK, Jiří – ZAHRADNÍČEK, Tomáš: *Rozděleni minulostí: Vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989.* Praha, Knihovna Václava Havla 2011, pp. 135–181.

[9] GABAL, Peter: Havel se omluvil bývalému vídeňskému starostovi Zilkovi. In: *Radio Prague International* [online], 08. 11. 2008. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: https://cesky.radio.cz/havel-se-omluvil-byvalemu-videnskemu-starostovi-zilkovi-8434400.

[10] SUK, J.: Prezident Václav Havel a břemeno (komunistické) minulosti.

[11] Statistika vydaných lustračních osvědčení – 2025 [Statistics of Issued Lustration Certificates – 2025]. In: *Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky* [online], 03. 06. 2025. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/lustrace-29644.aspx?q=Y2hudW09MTc%3d.

the age group who could be affected by the lustration problem is constantly falling. These are people born before 31 November 1971, that is, those who are now fifty-four years and older.

Drumbl and Holá correctly point out that whereas "informers" were ostracized, other, less visible supporters of the former regime with a clean lustration certificate were able to have careers. On the other hand, the Czech lustration model does not apply to the sphere of politics. This means that even someone with a positive lustration certificate can become a candidate and a member of representative bodies, which is not possible in Poland or Latvia. A positively lustrated person also faces no restrictions in the private sphere, whereas in Poland and Lithuania this is not the case.[12] The Czech lustration laws[13] do not concern only secret collaborators of the State Security. These were only one of the categories of screened people pursuant to Act No. 451/1991 Coll. The disqualification from holding major public positions also applied to StB members, higher officials of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ), members of the People's Militia (*Lidové milice*) and graduates of Soviet security schools. Quite understandably, the lustration laws do not apply to occasional, vulgo "informers". The claim that lustration was a common practice in Czech history and that such ostracization from society occurred after 1948 or after 1969 is historically unacceptable and an oversimplification (p. 73).

The fourth part of the book presents the content of the files of six StB "informers" (secret collaborators). As the authors mention in one part, they read approximately a hundred different files and finally selected twenty-three. Six are presented in the book and a summary of the other seventeen was made available

[12] See KOSAŘ, David: Lustrace a běh času. In: BOBEK, Michal – MOLEK, Pavel – ŠIMÍČEK, Vojtěch (eds.): *Komunistické právo v Československu: Kapitoly z dějin bezpráví*. Brno, Masarykova univerzita – Mezinárodní politologický ústav 2009, pp. 228–258, here p. 240.

[13] Zákon č. 451/1991 Sb., kterým se stanoví některé další předpoklady pro výkon některých funkcí ve státních orgánech a organizacích České a Slovenské Federativní Republiky, České republiky a Slovenské republiky [Act No. 451/1991 Coll.: On Standards Required for Holding Specific Positions in the State Administration of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Czech Republic and Slovak Republic]. In: *Zákony pro lidi: Sbírka zákonů* [online], with effect from 5th November 1991. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1991-451; Zákon č. 279/1992 Sb. České národní rady o některých dalších předpokladech pro výkon některých funkcí obsazovaných ustanovením nebo jmenováním příslušníků Policie České republiky a příslušníků Sboru nápravné výchovy České republiky [Act No. 279/1992 Coll.: On Certain Other Prerequisites for the Exercise of Certain Offices Filled by Designation or Appointment of Members of the Police of the Czech Republic and Members of the Corrections Corps of the Czech Republic]. In: *Ibidem* [online], with effect from 1st July 1992. [Accessed 2025-09-15.] Available at: https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1992-279.

on a special educational website.[14] The authors do not delve into the method of their selection. The main purpose was to give different examples in order to undermine the assumed homogeneity of the group of "informers". Individual examples were presented anonymously, but specific files can easily be identified thanks to the cited archival numbers.

In the fifth chapter, the authors' intention is to give a full description of the relationship between "informers" and the State Security members. They primarily identified emotions, such as fear, allegiance, desire and resentment. They also recorded how "informers" sought advantages or tried to settle accounts through their relationship with the StB, or how their secret collaboration developed during life cycles and with regard to life changes. The authors see cooperation as a contractual relationship, in which "informers" established relationships, occasionally even close relationships, with the supervising officers and adapted to informing, perceiving it as an activity they had committed to. However, they also reveal this world as a space which allowed some individuals to pursue their morally problematic needs. At the same time, they sometimes ascribe a positive role to the State Security in solving problems for "informers". In general, the chapter gives the impression that the position of "informers" was ambiguous, seeing them as somewhere between culprits and victims. Nevertheless, the study of the secret police archives also leads the authors to more general conclusions on Czechoslovak society in the past regime: "The archived StB files we reviewed present a portrayal of life in Communist Czechoslovakia in which nearly everyone is having an affair, is stealing from the workplace, has alcohol or drug dependencies, and is otherwise in routine default and delict. These vignettes contrast with portrayals of life in Communist Czechoslovakia as refracted through ex post oral histories (among ordinary citizens, not informers) which elevate family life as sacrosanct and make no mention of affairs or endemic substance abuse, but indeed emphasize that everyone to some degree was swindling the state." (p. 161) The authors themselves are not sure which view is more true to reality.

The sixth chapter offers a recommendation on how to approach "informers" in the transitional period between dictatorship and a free society. The authors urge circumspection, an individual approach and a search for individual motives instead of an overall denunciation of "informers", turning them into scapegoats. The subsequent, seventh chapter outlines proposals on how to treat specific cases of "informers". The authors here even introduce the concept of "a just or unjust informing theory". This theory aims to contribute to re-evaluating the public

[14] DRUMBL, Mark A. – HOLÁ, Barbora: *Informers up Close: Stories from Communist Prague. Online Appendix* [online]. [Accessed 2025-11-04.] Available at: https://nscr.nl/app/uploads/2024/01/Informers-Up-Close_Online_Appendix_8-January-2024.pdf.

perception of those individuals who help the authorities in democratic states to enforce the law by informing on people who break it (p. 236).

There are many parts in the book *Informers Up Close* that may stir controversy. Mark A. Drumbl and Barbora Holá outline provocative, but poorly substantiated arguments without a second thought. These, together with several clichés that they repeat, create a new interpretation of the communist past. They focus on forced relationships between "informers" and State Security members. However, what they fail to take into account are social conditions and the power that is wielded and the substantial role that a repressive apparatus played in establishing these conditions. In general, they perceive StB "informers" as tragic victims, who subsequently inflicted harm on others (p. 198). Only history will show whether such an interpretation will become accepted. However, it is unlikely that "stories from the communist Prague" as captured in the book *Informers Up Close* will provide answers to questions that are now still being raised by the world of StB secret collaborators. This book is the result of research conducted at a distance, apparently with the corresponding methodological set of instruments and based on a vast range of literature, yet without long-term research into this issue and a sufficient knowledge of the conditions and historical context. For an unbiased reader, this book will be a disappointment.

Translated by Blanka Medková

Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; State Security (*Státní bezpečnost*, StB); Czech society; communism; transitional justice; secret collaborators; "informers"; lustrations

DOI 10.51134/sod.2025.035

The Czech/German/Polish Giant Mountains

The Rise of Modern Tourism amidst Contested Ethnic Coexistence

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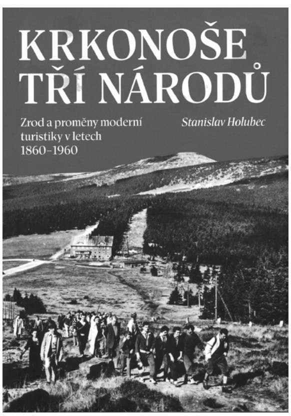

HOLUBEC, Stanislav:
Krkonoše tří národů: Zrod a proměny moderní turistiky v letech 1860–1960.
Praha, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny – Historický ústav AV ČR 2024, v. v. i., 525 pages, ISBN 978-80-7422-949-7.

When *Krkonoše* [the Giant Mountains] are mentioned today, Czech residents likely think of the highest peak Sněžka, the beloved TV series *Krkonošské pohádky* [the Giant Mountains Fairy Tales], and perhaps the tragic story of cross-country skiers Bohumil Hanč and Václav Vrbata in 1913, which was recently adapted into a feature film.[1] From the Polish perspective, *Karkonosze* are perceived as a perhaps overly commercialized, yet highly popular recreational destination, symbolized by the meteorological station on the Polish side of Sněžka's summit, colloquially known as "flying saucers". For many Germans, too, *die Riesengebirge* represent a traditional tourist destination, associated with a long history of German settlement. This region at the crossroads of three nations offers a vivid history of modern mountain tourism set against the backdrop of complex ethnic coexistence. It is this intricate past that Czech researcher Stanislav Holubec has chosen to unravel in his book.

1 *Poslední závod* [The Last Race], 2022. Directed by Tomáš Hodan.

The author is affiliated with the Institute of History (*Historický ústav*) of the Czech Academy of Sciences, where he heads the Department of Modern Cultural and Social History. His long-term research focuses on the social history of twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe, the history of cross-border regions, and historical sociology. He turned his attention to the Giant Mountains as part of the project "Central European Mountains Krkonoše 1890–1950: Modernity, Tourism, Nationalism", funded by the Czech Science Foundation (*Grantová agentura České republiky*) in 2020–2023. Within this project, in addition to the present book, he has published several related studies.[2] Combining the approaches of borderland studies, environmental history, and the critical history of modernity, he guides the reader through a century of economic and infrastructural development, ethnic tension, and the beginnings of nature conservation. In this detailed synthesis, he shows how major historical events unfolded in a small geographical area along one of the oldest borders in Central Europe.[3]

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2 HOLUBEC, Stanislav: Between the Czech Krkonoše and German Riesengebirge: Nationalism and Tourism in the Giant Mountains 1880s–1940. In: *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2024), pp. 337–359; IDEM: České a polské Krkonoše 1945–1963: Mezi ochranou přírody a modernizací. In: *Český časopis historický*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (2022), pp. 777–833; IDEM: Náš Yellowstonský park? Státní ochrana přírody a veřejnost v českých a slezských Krkonoších od konce 19. století do druhé světové války. In: *Střed: Časopis pro mezioborová studia střední Evropy 19. a 20. století*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2023), pp. 8–43.

3 In the context of Central European border regions, such a detailed analysis – both in its temporal span and thematic scope – is unique. For research on cross-border ties and conflicts in mountainous border regions, see the various studies on the *Šumava/Böhmerwald* or *Bayerischer Wald* area, such as: KAUCKÁ, Kristýna: Der transimperiale Käfer: Debatten über die grenzüberschreitende Zirkulation wissenschaftlicher Erkenntnis am Beispiel des Böhmerwalds in den 1870er Jahren. In: HOLEC, Roman – ZÜCKERT, Martin (eds.): *Umweltgeschichte in mitteleuropäischen Kontexten*. Leipzig, Universität Leipzig 2024, pp. 307–330; ŠIMKOVÁ, Pavla: Die Teilung des Eisernen Vorhangs: Grenzüberschreitender Naturschutz im Bayerischen Wald und Šumava. In: HEURICH, Marco – MAUCH, Christoph (eds.): *Urwald der Bayern: Geschichte, Politik und Natur im Nationalpark Bayerischer Wald.* Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2020, pp. 84–96. For the Polish-Slovak border region, see: HOENIG, Bianca: *Geteilte Berge: Eine Konfliktgeschichte der Naturnutzung in der Tatra*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2018; WIĘCKOWSKI, Marek: Nature Protection in the Polish-Slovakian Borderland during the Twentieth Century. In: *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 80 (2023), pp. 5–17. For the Carpathian Mountains, see: HOLEC, Roman: Der Ungarische Karpathenverein als Beispiel des mitteleuropäischen Transfers im Naturschutz. In: HOLEC, R. – ZÜCKERT, M. (eds.): *Umweltgeschichte in mitteleuropäischen Kontexten*, pp. 281–306; ZÜCKERT, Martin: Karpaten-Deutsche: Naturraum und Ethnizität im ethnopolitischen Diskurs in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts. In: PIŇOSOVÁ, Jana – HOSE, Susanne – LANGER, Marcel (eds.): *Minderheit – Macht – Natur: Verhandlungen im Zeitalter des Nationalstaats*. Bautzen, Domowina-Verlag 2022, pp. 205–225. For the Slovenian Alps, see: ROEDER, Carolin Firouzeh: Slovenia's Triglav National Park: From Imperial Borderland to National Ethnoscape. In: GISSIBL, Bernhard – HÖHLER,

Holubec opens the book *Krkonoše tří národů: Zrod a proměny moderní turistiky v letech 1860–1960* [The Giant Mountains of Three Nations: Birth and Transformation of Modern Tourism, 1860–1960] with a dense description of the transformation of an initially sparsely populated region, tracing its rise during the era of weaving-industry prosperity in the eighteenth century, showing how the mountainous environment shaped the craft's success, and its subsequent decline. This period was followed by the industrialization of the region, corresponding population growth, and the first stirrings of tourist interest in the cross-border mountain range. Throughout his narrative, the author interweaves economic and social statistics with vivid micro-histories, archival notes, and memoirs. This technique enlivens the complex account and makes for engaging reading.[4] He maintains this approach throughout the book, using broad political, economic, and social developments as a backdrop for the microhistory of local associations, the life stories of prominent individuals, and the role of nature itself as an active agent in the historical narrative.

The book is chronologically divided into two major sections: the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the outbreak of the First World War, and the subsequent "age of extremes" (Eric Hobsbawm), marked by the profound transformations and challenges the region faced in connection with both world wars, the interwar economic crisis, and the postwar redrawing of borders and population shifts. Yet the central questions – concerning the development of tourism, the role of ethnic issues, and the mutual comparison, relations, and influences between both sides of the mountains – run throughout the whole period under study.

Regarding the dynamics of tourist modernity, Holubec argues that the development of tourism progressed continuously from the mid-nineteenth century onward, without any significant break. Initially, the more economically developed Silesian side of the mountains attracted the majority of visitors, with aristocratic travelers learning about the region through early travel guides. Accessibility played a crucial role, and the tourist discovery of the area was accelerated by the expansion of railways and roads. The activities of German mountain associations, founded in the 1880s, were also pivotal (p. 77). By contrast, the Jilemnice branch of the Czech Tourist Club (*Klub českých turistů*, KČT) played only a marginal role in the tourist exploration of the mountains, due to the minority status of the Czech population in the area. However, it was not absent from the national

Sabine – KUPPER, Patrick (eds.): *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective.* New York – Oxford, Berghahn 2012, pp. 240–255.

4 Similarly, a recent book by Czech historian Jan Pezda explores the origins of modern tourism by drawing on the personal memories of travelers (PEZDA, Jan: *Slunce, voda, vzduch: Zrod moderního turismu*. Praha, Paseka 2025).

disputes of the era. Although national animosity in the Giant Mountains was less pronounced than in other German-speaking areas, the concept of nation figured prominently in the activities of Czech and German tourism promoters. These ethnic conflicts manifested in attempts to appropriate key mountain symbols (such as the folkloric figure of *Krakonoš/Rübezahl* and the source of the Elbe River), in the construction of competing monuments, and especially in linguistic demands. For instance, tourists insisted on guest books or the ability to order in their native language at mountain huts, and threatened boycotts of establishments that failed to comply (pp. 130–132).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, national animosity in the region began to escalate. The previous continuous and gradual development of tourism gave way to a period of extremes, during which tourism in the Giant Mountains at times nearly disappeared. During the First World War, the industry was curtailed primarily by travel restrictions and the food rationing system, which limited the ability of mountain huts to operate. In the interwar period, by contrast, a new tourism boom began in the mid-1920s, driven by renewed economic growth and the waning of postwar national radicalism. This era was even marked by cooperation between Czech and German tourist associations. As Holubec notes, "particularly in winter sports, trends emerged that transformed the Giant Mountains according to the demands of modern tourism" (p. 189). These included bobsled races characteristic of the Silesian Giant Mountains, ski jumping popular throughout the range, and the construction of the first cable car to Černá hora from Janské Lázně in 1926–1928.

However, the Great Depression and the growing threat posed by Nazi Germany once again suppressed tourism. Holubec recounts an illustrative wartime anecdote: "In a desperate attempt to procure metals for the war industry, the authorities even decided to dismantle the ten-kilometer Hirschberg–Obergiesdorf tram line and replace it with trolleybuses." (p. 260) Although the Giant Mountains region was spared destruction during military operations, the postwar devastation of recreational facilities – and, particularly on the Czech side, episodes of ethnic violence – resulted in the virtual collapse of mountain tourism in this period.

In the author's century-long periodization, the postwar years form the final phase, marked by ambitious plans for new tourist infrastructure, strengthened nature protection, and cross-border cooperation following the resettlement of the mountains by Czechs and Poles.[5] However, the onset of the Cold War prevented

[5] For the Polonization of the Silesian Giant Mountains after the Second World War and for East German tourism in this former German territory, see: HARTWICH, Mateusz J.: *Das schlesische Riesengebirge: Die Polonisierung einer Landschaft nach 1945.* Wien – Köln/R. – Weimar, Böhlau 2012; IDEM: „Turisté vystupují převážně jako uvědomělí občané našeho státu": Východní Němci v Krkonoších v letech 1945–1970. In: *Soudobé dějiny,* Vol. 17, No. 3 (2010), pp. 349–368.

these initiatives from materializing. National priorities shifted towards economic development rather than tourism, and new travel restrictions were imposed. Only at the end of the 1950s did a new phase of mountain development begin, characterized by the long-awaited establishment of national parks, but also by the construction of ski lifts and the rise of mass automobile tourism.

From a thematic perspective, a significant contribution of the book lies in its examination of tourism beyond the aristocratic and elite circles of the earliest visitors. Holubec incorporates broader social strata, including women, youth, and workers. The figure of the female tourist, in particular, has recently become a prominent topic in historiography and literary studies.[6] Holubec's work adds an important dimension to this discussion by demonstrating how the nationalism and conservatism of early tourist associations initially rejected women's active participation. He argues that their emancipation occurred largely in the interwar period, especially through their involvement in skiing and entrepreneurial activities. Previously, women had often been portrayed as incapable or physically weak. Holubec traces this evolution in the perception of the mountains, their visitors, and tourism trends across local and national media. He illustrates the shift by noting that while pre-1914 drawings were dominated by caricatures of "plump ladies falling from sledges or being dragged in sedan chairs by exhausted porters", the later period witnessed the emergence of "cosmopolitan advertisements for ski fashion" (p. 213).

The author's ability to trace such detailed social and cultural shifts is grounded in the book's exceptionally broad research base. This includes the press of the period, archival sources (particularly the records of tourist associations and prominent regional figures), and hundreds of secondary works in the respective languages of the three nations connected with the Giant Mountains. Holubec does not merely rely on the press of the period; he also critically verifies and revises its often-nationalistic assertions, which tend to omit or deliberately conceal key facts.[7] Furthermore, he demonstrates his experience in biographical research by skillfully weaving in the lives of important regional figures (such as the naturalist

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[6] In 2024, the Czech National Museum, in cooperation with the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences, organized the conference "Women Travelers, Women on the Move / Ženy cestovatelky, ženy na cestách". In: *Národní muzeum* [online]. [Accessed 2025-11-20.] Available at: https://www.nm.cz/naprstkovo-muzeum-asijskych-africkych-a-americkych-kultur/zeny-cestovatelky-zeny-na-cestach.

[7] The author demonstrates this, for example, through the story of the construction of the cable car to Černá hora, where the German press criticized the Czech project in a predominantly German town of Janské Lázně (*Johannisbad*) and lamented the exclusion of Germans from the ceremonial opening, yet failed to mention that a German speaker had in fact participated in the event (p. 199).

and conservationist Jindřich Ambrož),[8] thereby creating a more vivid and multi-dimensional portrait of the Giant Mountains' history.

Holubec presents the existing literature in a chapter placed after the conclusion. Given that this section introduces historical authors who are frequently referenced throughout the text, placing this overview closer to the introduction might have enhanced clarity for the reader. This is, however, a minor structural point, as the author is otherwise meticulous. He clearly explains his terminology at the outset and, despite the changes in German and Polish place names, the reader never loses his or her way in the text.

Ultimately, however, the book's meticulous construction serves a larger purpose: to situate the story of the Giant Mountains within the broader sweep of Central European history. The author consistently embeds the development of local tourism within a broader Central European context, drawing comparisons and parallels with other border regions – particularly those with contested national identities – as well as other mountainous areas. He shows, for example, how local tourist associations were inspired by the older Alpine Club (the German-Austrian *Alpenverein*, founded in 1873), how technologies were adopted, and how ideas about nature conservation spread from Saxony and Prussia.

The result is an excellent work of Central European history, grounded in an extensive foundation of primary sources. It enriches not only the history of tourism but also regional and borderland history, the narrative of Czech-German coexistence, and environmental history. One can only hope that other Central European border regions will receive similarly detailed bilateral or trilateral historical syntheses that employ such a multi-layered combination of approaches.

Keywords:

Giant Mountains/Krkonoše/Riesengebirge; Czech lands; Czechoslovakia; Germany; Poland; tourism; nationalism; modernity; borderlands; mountain associations; Czech-German relations; environmental protection

DOI 10.51134/sod.2025.040

[8] Jindřich Ambrož (1878–1955) was one of the most important promoters of nature conservation in the Czech part of the Giant Mountains. A member of the Czech Tourist Club, he published maps of the Czech side of the range and advocated for the establishment of a mountain rescue service. In the interwar period, he served as conservator for state nature protection and, after the creation of the Krkonoše National Park, he became the administrator of its western section.

On “Epistemic Arrest” and Different Forms of Capital

A Bourdieusian Analysis of Czechoslovak Ethnography

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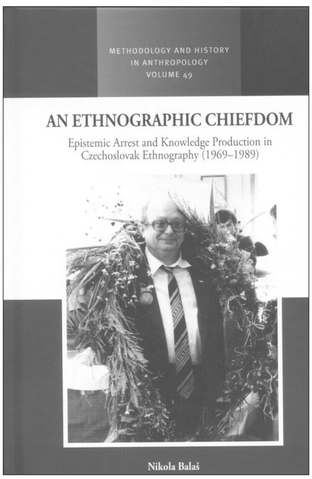

BALAŠ, Nikola:

An Ethnographic Chiefdom: Epistemic Arrest and Knowledge Production in Czechoslovak Ethnography (1969–1989).

New York, Berghahn Books 2024, 356 pages, ISBN 978-1-80539-674-1.

In this book, Nikola Balaš, examines the recent history of the discipline that has been referred to in Czech as *národopis*, *etnografie* and *etnologie* in different periods of the twentieth century. Moreover, after 1989, the discipline also had to define its position in relation to sociocultural anthropology, which happens to be the author’s own disciplinary background. The book thus joins a recent wave of interest in the history of Czechoslovak ethnography; apart from Jiří Hlaváček and Hana Bortlová-Vondráková’s earlier oral history of the discipline,[1] *An Ethnographic Chiefdom* has been published almost concurrently with Marie Bahenská and Lydie Petráňová’s Czech-language collective volume on ethnography and folkloristics in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1989.[2] However, the present

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[1] HLAVÁČEK, Jiří – BORTLOVÁ-VONDRÁKOVÁ, Hana (eds.): *Mezi státním plánem a badatelskou svobodou: Československá etnografie a folkloristika ve vzpomínkách pamětníků*. Praha, Academia 2018.

[2] BAHENSKÁ, Marie – PETRÁŇOVÁ, Lydie et al.: *Horizonty bádání: Etnografie a folkloristika v českých zemích v letech 1945–1989*. Praha, Academia 2024.

book's significance extends beyond a mere chronological account of the developments – and taxonomical changes – the discipline underwent in socialist Czechoslovakia. Its ambition is to interrogate the mechanisms of scientific knowledge production in state socialism.

A central tenet of this inquiry is Balaš's assertion that the discipline of ethnography – the preferred term employed during the period of normalization in the 1970s and 1980s, where the book's primary focus resides – was characterized by "epistemic arrest". This term refers to what Balaš sees as a lack of a "culture of contention" within the discipline that would drive forward knowledge production and enable individuals within ethnography to further their positions. In other words, ethnographers seldom engaged in critical debates concerning each other's work in a manner reminiscent of Western anthropology, a field with which the author draws parallels. The book posits that this dearth of critical engagement can be attributed to the field's power structure. To demonstrate this, Balaš offers a Bourdieusian reading of the development of ethnography and convincingly demonstrates that bringing Pierre Bourdieu's sociology to the study of state socialism offers an illuminating interpretive frame for this period.

Adopting a perspective informed by Bourdieu's field theory, *An Ethnographic Chiefdom* explores the practice of normalization-era ethnography not only in terms of its intellectual production, but also via other factors, particularly the different types of capital that enabled individuals to secure and further their position within the discipline. This is because, in contrast to Thomas Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions,[3] which Balaš also extensively discusses in the book's first chapter, Bourdieu's field theory views the field of science as being produced not only by epistemic forces, but also by a variety of other factors.

Consequently, Balaš contends that within the context of late socialist Czechoslovakia a number of significant sources of power, or forms of capital, exerted influence over the scientific field. Of these, the most important – though not all-important – was what Balaš terms "party capital". Membership or candidacy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*) was a determining factor in facilitating career advancement, yet Balaš persuasively demonstrates that it was not necessarily a prerequisite for obtaining employment in scientific institutions or even publishing scientific works, as other forms of capital could also play a significant role.

Another type of capital that could present significant advantages for its bearer was what Balaš calls "clandestine capital", meaning contacts with the *Státní bezpečnost* (State Security, or secret police), including being an agent or informer.

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[3] KUHN, Thomas: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1962.

This form of capital, however, is arguably given least attention in the book. While the author claims that such clandestine capital could further one’s career, little evidence is provided – for instance through records of the Security Services Archives (*Archiv bezpečnostních složek*) – that would illustrate this claim with specific examples.

A totalitarian interpretation of the socialist period would see party and clandestine capital as the two most important sources of power. *An Ethnographic Chiefdom* puts forward the argument that such an account would be limited, as other types of capital were also available to actors within the field. The Bourdieusian framework allows the author to effectively dispel the assumption that critical discussion was stifled by the dominance of Marxism-Leninism as an intellectual and political paradigm, held in place by a repressive apparatus. Conversely, the utilization of alternative forms of capital afforded considerable flexibility in the nature of scholarship that could be pursued within the discipline, unencumbered by the strictures of Marxism-Leninism. At the same time, the book also counters the equally widespread interpretation of politically unorthodox practices within state socialism as “islands of freedom” (*ostrůvky svobody* in Czech). Such a view, Balaš suggests, places too much emphasis on the actions of individuals, overlooking structural conditions, which field theory can help explain.

A notable method of compensating for the absence of party capital was ethnographic capital, which encompassed professional expertise and mastery of the discipline. Using specific examples, Balaš shows that this did matter, revealing that scientific works were published not merely as lip service to the prevailing Marxist-Leninist ideology, but as scientifically valid in their own right, drawing upon alternative intellectual sources. The practice of aligning one’s findings with the prevailing ideology was predominantly adopted by individuals aspiring to managerial positions within the field. However, it was not a prerequisite for activity in the field as such. The book demonstrates the author’s familiarity with the extensive collection of ethnographic works produced at the Institute for Ethnography and Folklore Studies of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (*Ústav pro etnografii a folkloristiku Československé akademie věd*) and the Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies (*Katedra etnografie a folkloristiky*) at Charles University, the two institutions on which the author focuses. Balaš is thus partly an insider, as he is now affiliated as a researcher and lecturer with both successor institutions to the abovementioned Institute and Department. However, as a scholar of a younger generation, he is not a contemporary witness to the events he recounts and thus maintains analytical distance from the subject matter. Despite the focus on Prague, the text also acknowledges the separate domains of Moravian and Slovak ethnography, though these are not the subject of detailed analysis. Much of the book rests on thorough and convincing readings of ethnographic production published in the 1970s and 1980s.

Finally, a significant source of power was social capital or, in other words, the various informal ties, obligations, favours and other practices necessary for "getting things done". The book's argument posits that this form of capital caused a disruption to the autonomy of the field of ethnography, "because its existence contributed significantly to diverting ethnographers from engaging with each other by means of critical discussion" (p. 263). It therefore helped create the conditions for what Balaš terms "epistemic arrest". One could, of course, remark here that the power of social capital in the form of informal economies of favour over the importance of economic capital was characteristic of late socialism as such, whether speaking of the field of scientific knowledge production or, for example, the provisioning of consumer goods. In this sense, a Bourdieusian framework can be useful also for analysing different aspects of state socialist social realities.

Importantly, Balaš's argument for epistemic arrest does not equate to asserting that the prevailing paradigm in ethnography was positivism. On the contrary, the book goes to some length to illustrate that "even the most descriptive works can be shown to have represented their subject matter in relation to a particular ethnic (or national) culture or tradition, a particular social (that is, class) culture or tradition" (p. 166). The argument presented in the book suggests that the phenomenon of epistemic arrest occurred because the need for mutual criticism and competition among scholars was not a prerequisite for advancing one's career in the field. This could be achieved more effectively by the use of party, social or clandestine capital.

The pivotal figure in this narrative is Antonín Robek (1931–2008) – the "chief" of the late socialist ethnographic world in Prague. Robek presided over the two prominent institutions of Prague ethnography: the Institute for Ethnography and Folklore Studies of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and the Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies at Charles University. Robek was instrumental in the functioning of the field, leveraging significant party capital and serving as its ideological guardian.

While the book is focused on a specific field and a particularly dominant figure within it, it has the ambition to contribute substantially to our understanding of the production of scientific knowledge in late socialism in general. This is perhaps also one of the pitfalls of the book, as so much within the field of ethnography seems to rest on the very specific persona of Robek. Despite Robek's central role as "chief", readers are presented with limited personal information about him. In addition to the various forms of capital examined by Balaš, it is conceivable that other, so-called soft factors may have contributed to Robek's attainment of his exceptional status. Though Robek is described as possessing charisma, his personality is not extensively discussed, leaving readers to ponder the nature of his character. Was he approachable and generous or strict and overbearing? Did he exude authority in personal contact or was he informal in interactions with others? Readers can make some subjective inferences from the photograph on the cover of the book, which shows the bespectacled and balding figure of Robek draped in a wreath-like folkloristic artefact, looking somewhat amused or possibly also slightly embarrassed and perhaps even undignified, depending on how much one wants to read into his expression. It is reasonable to hypothesize that for an individual who has been so deeply involved in a specific academic discipline over an extended period, the manner in which his presence was perceived and experienced by his colleagues also played a significant role in that particular field. However, the book does not provide much insight into this aspect.

Another question the persona of Robek raises is the extent to which such a large accumulation of power was typical also of other academic disciplines in late socialism and whether there the concentration of different forms of capital was not in fact more diffuse, which – it is possible to hypothesize – probably had effects on how those disciplines were practiced. The final part of the book, which attempts to extend the argument about epistemic arrest to Czech academia more broadly, is perhaps the most thought-provoking. It is, of course, always possible to propose counterexamples, and one is mentioned in the book itself: Czechoslovak economists, in contrast to ethnographers, critically debated various economic concepts and, as a number of studies have by now shown, were conversant with Western economic paradigms and critical of the prevailing planned economy well before the collapse of state socialism in 1989. This prompts the question of which factors influenced the field of economics to yield outcomes that contrast with those observed in ethnography. A similar analysis of different scientific disciplines would likely reveal somewhat different emphases on different forms of capital. But to understand where those emphases lay, it would, arguably, be necessary to look beyond just the structural forces and take into account various idiosyncrasies of personality or material conditions.

In the book's final chapter, Balaš posits that the structure of Czech academia in general hinders critical debate even today. This is an acute observation which has much to do with the field's small size. Within a setting where individuals are personally acquainted with one another, informal ties – the power of social capital – are likely to yield better results than the merits of seemingly free intellectual debate, which in such a setting is never free from personal concerns and relations in any case. A case in point is the discipline of historiography, which has seemingly produced lively debates in the past decades on the totalitarian vs. revisionist interpretation of state socialism. Yet, I would argue, these discussions have been less the mark of genuine critical contention and more a proxy expression of a political conflict, where the past is used to demarcate ideological positions in the present. This conflict is moreover coloured by numerous personal allegiances and antipathies in the field.[4] We may thus ask whether the significance of social capital over other forms was characteristic only of late socialism and whether it continues to play a very similar role even today.

Overall, *An Ethnographic Chiefdom* is an important and illuminating contribution to the history of knowledge production in state socialism. The book presents a theoretically-driven argument, yet is meticulously researched in terms of sources, based on extensive archival research as well as interviews. While historians tend to proceed inductively from their sources before arriving at theoretical conclusions, as an anthropologist, Balaš demonstrates how a well-chosen theoretical framework can reveal new perspectives on historical circumstances. As such, the book offers a valuable contribution to understanding the complex interactions of power and knowledge in state socialism.

Keywords:
Czechoslovakia; state socialism; normalization; history of science; ethnography; folkloristics; Pierre Bourdieu; Antonín Robek

DOI 10.51134/sod.2025.037

[4] Some aspects of this conflict were recently analysed in SUK, Jiří (ed.): *Dějiny v exekuci: Jak přemýšlet a psát o komunismu*. Praha, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2024.

Telling the Stars’ Story

Oral Histories of Czechoslovak Astronomy and Their Limits

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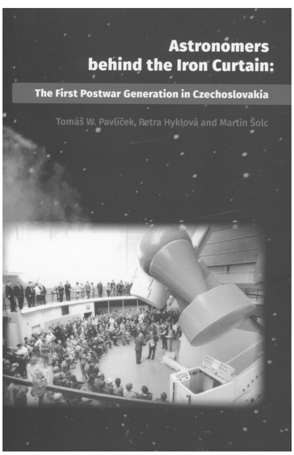

PAVLÍČEK, Tomáš W. – HYKLOVÁ, Petra – ŠOLC, Martin:
Astronomers behind the Iron Curtain: The First Postwar Generation in Czechoslovakia.
Translated from the Czech by Melvyn Clarke
and Jessica Kendall Hankiewicz.
Prague, MatfyzPress 2024, 285 pages,
ISBN 978-80-7378-464-5.

The authors of this volume set out to present the history of astronomy in Czechoslovakia during the “short twentieth century”. In doing so, they aim to fill a long-standing gap in the country’s historiography of astronomy, as co-editor Martin Šolc notes in the Preface. The gap they aim to fill is full of challenges, as the development of science in Czechoslovakia during the communist period was closely intertwined with the political situation in the country.

The book is based primarily on oral interviews with nine Czechoslovak astronomers.[1] The editors were rightly aware of the importance of recording the recollec-

[1] Jiří Grygar, Jan Hladký, Pavla Horská, Ivan Hubený, Pavel Mayer, Zdeněk Mikulášek, Luboš Perek, Martin Šolc, and Jaroslav Vojta. The interviews with Martin Černohorský (physicist), Miroslav Krůta and Gábina Zoubková (geologists), Jaroslav Kurzweil (mathematician) and

tions of surviving astronomers and physicists, thereby preserving valuable insights for future generations. As is well known, carefully conducted oral histories often serve researchers decades later – as is the case with the SIAM Oral History Collection,[2] the Charles Babbage Institute Oral History Collection,[3] or Sources for the History of Quantum Physics,[4] all of which are now available online, with the interviewees' consent. It is therefore regrettable that the full transcripts are not included in this book and that only some interviews have previously been published elsewhere.[5]

The volume under review, publication of which was supported by the Czech Science Foundation through the project "The First Postwar Generation of Czech Astronomers, Astrophysicists and Mathematicians: Interdisciplinary Research of the History of Science Networks",[6] is not commercially available but (as indicated in the imprint) was published for the internal use of the Astronomical Institute at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics of Charles University in Prague. The photographic material was provided by the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague.

The Table of Contents indicates that the main author of the monograph is Tomáš W. Pavlíček. His co-authors, Petra Hyklová and Martin Šolc, contributed to two chapters: Chapter I, on the interwar tradition of teaching astronomy, written by Hyklová, and Chapter V, on new observational instruments and other tools, co-authored by Pavlíček and Šolc. The book as a whole comprises a Preface, an Introduction, six chapters, and a Conclusion.

Jan Mietelski (Polish astronomer) provide important contexts. All the interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2023 by Petra Hyklová, Kateřina Kočí, Barbora Kulawiaková, Tomáš W. Pavlíček, and Alice Velková.

[2] NASH, Stephen G. (ed.): *A History of Scientific Computing*. New York, Association for Computing Machinery 1990. SIAM stands for Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics and its oral history archive is available at: https://history.siam.org/oralhistories.htm. [Accessed 2025-10-30.]

[3] Charles Babbage Institute Oral History Collection. In: *University of Minnesota Libraries' Archives and Special Collections Department* [online], Minneapolis (MN). [Accessed 2025-10-30.] Available at: https://cse.umn.edu/cbi/cbi-oral-histories.

[4] KUHN, Thomas S. – HEILBRON, John L. – FORMAN, Paul – ALLEN, Lilly: *Sources for History of Quantum Physics: An Inventory and Report* [online]. Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society 1967. [Accessed 2025-10-30.] Available at: https://www.amphilsoc.org/guides/ahqp/.

[5] PAVLÍČEK, Tomáš W.: Interview with the Astronomer Luboš Perek: Analysis of Generational Consciousness. In: *Práce z dějin Akademie věd*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2022), pp. 45–96.

[6] The First Postwar Generation of Czech Astronomers, Astrophysicists and Mathematicians: Interdisciplinary Research of the History of Science Networks. In: *STARFOS* [online]. [Accessed 2025-10-30.] Available at: https://starfos.tacr.cz/en/projekty/GA19-20678S.

In the Preface, Martin Šolc explains to the reader why the book is urgently needed. As it is a preface, some inconsistency in dates and concepts is understandable. Unfortunately, the English is difficult to follow, which limits its ability to engage the reader.

Except for Chapter I, the book – including the Introduction – relies heavily on the conducted oral histories, often taking the interviewees' statements at face value, such as Luboš Perek's remark about the "golden years" of the Cold War (p. 13). On closer reading, it appears that Perek valued this period because UNESCO made it almost obligatory for countries to cooperate in the field of astronomy. This alone could have provided the basis for a substantial discussion, raising questions such as when and how UNESCO intervened, and what enabled astronomers to cooperate on topics of potential military significance that might otherwise have been confidential. The Introduction sketches a range of themes, from Thomas Kuhn's notion of scientific revolutions to Peter Haas's concept of epistemic communities. Yet it remains unclear how the authors intended to employ these frameworks in analysing the interviews, or whether they were used at all in shaping the narrative distilled from the oral histories.

The first chapter, by Petra Hyklová, is announced as a study of the interwar period, yet a substantial portion is devoted to the nineteenth century, justified by the need to trace the discipline's roots. Hyklová then offers an overview of interwar history based on archival sources and published commemorative articles.

The second chapter, entitled "Students: The First Postwar Generation", draws on interviews with Luboš Perek (1919–2020) and Martin Černohorský (1923–2024),[7] both of which have previously been published *in extenso*.[8] Their accounts are complemented by the life story of Miroslav Plavec (1925–2008).[9] The chapter opens with extracts from Perek's diary from May 1945, recording the final days of the Second World War, and continues to present the experiences of Perek and his wife as representative of a generation of young people who were unable to begin or pursue their studies between November 1939 and May 1945.[10]

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7 Černohorský was a Czech physicist and academic linked to astronomy through Masaryk University's Institute of Theoretical Physics and Astrophysics. An expert in X-ray crystallography and physics education, he became the first rector of the Silesian University in Opava (1992–1998).

8 PAVLÍČEK, Tomáš W.: Bytí zaslíbené fyzice a studentům. In: ČERNOHORSKÝ, Martin – PAVLÍČEK, Tomáš W. – KULAWIAKOVÁ, Barbora: *Studenti v centru pozornosti*. Brno, Masarykova univerzita 2023, pp. 9–108.

9 Plavec went into exile in 1969 and later became a professor of astronomy at the University of California, gaining international recognition as an expert on binary stars.

10 Perek was one of the most influential figures in Czech astronomy. In addition to serving as Director of the Astronomical Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences from 1968

In the third chapter, "For Society: People's Observatories – Temples of Atheism or Education", the focus shifts to the life stories of Jiří Grygar (born 1936)[11] and Boris Valníček (1927–2021).[12] The authors seek to reconstruct the state of astronomy teaching at universities through the recollections of those who studied in the early postwar years and later became leading figures in the field. Their testimonies also shed light on earlier generations of astronomy popularisers, such as Luisa Landová-Štychová (1885–1969),[13] and on the circulation of astronomical knowledge, for example through the journal *Říše hvězd* [Realm of Stars]. The interviews further recount the constructions of the Prague planetarium and highlight the role of science in general, and astronomy in particular, in shaping the Marxist worldview. The chapter also includes details about internships in Leiden, made possible through the efforts of Luboš Perek.

The fourth chapter presents the founding of the Astrophysics Observatory (*Astrofyzikální observatoř*) and the Chronometry Laboratory (*Laboratoř pro měření času*) of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences through the recollections of Luboš Perek, with particular emphasis on the details he remembered, such as the personal qualities of the institutes' first directors. From the same perspective, the chapter also addresses the development of the Ondřejov Observatory near Prague, the International Geophysics Year (IGY, from July 1957 to December 1958), and the observations of the Sputnik 1 satellite. The second section turns to new directions in astronomy that emerged in the 1960s, intertwining these developments with contemporary political conditions and gender issues, especially as perceived by the participants and interviewees themselves. The concluding section expands on these themes, examining the intersections of gender and politics in greater depth.

to 1975, he also held the position of Secretary General of the International Astronomical Union (1967–1970) and later became Director of the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs. The telescope at the Ondřejov Observatory (the seventh largest in the world when it was commissioned in 1967 and whose construction Perek championed) has borne his name since 2012.

[11] In addition to his professional achievements, Grygar made an outstanding contribution to the popularization of astronomy and astrophysics. For a detailed account, see his comprehensive memoir *Dvě století v životě pozorovatele* (Praha, Academia 2024).

[12] From 1967 Valníček led Czechoslovak space research within the Interkosmos program. A committed Marxist, he promoted astronomy as a tool for scientific education and ideological outreach. His work bridged professional research and public engagement, shaping astronomy's role in socialist science.

[13] A prominent Czech journalist, feminist pioneer, communist politician, and science populariser, Landová-Štychová was one of the first women elected to the Chamber of Deputies (see HOLUBEC, Stanislav: *Nešťastná revolucionářka: Myšlenkový svět a každodennost Luisy Landové-Štychové.* Praha, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2021).

The fifth chapter deals with the use and practices of various instruments and locations of astronomical observations. Again, the stories are told through the memories of the actors and are interspersed with local myths about Moravia, Bohemia, and Slovakia. Detailed information about the individual telescopes is also presented in this way.

In the sixth chapter, the authors discuss how the international engagement of Czechoslovak astronomers reached its peak in the late 1960s, particularly with the Congress of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) held in Prague in August 1967 (where Perek was elected its Secretary General) and the inauguration of the two-metre telescope at Ondřejov. Following the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, geopolitical shifts forced a drastic change in strategies for maintaining international collaborations. As a result, so-called invisible networks – informal personal contacts of various kinds – began to play a crucial role. These networks enabled Czechoslovak astronomers to remain part of epistemic communities and sustain high-level international cooperation, both within the Eastern bloc (e.g. the Interkosmos agency and the Hvar Observatory in Yugoslavia) and across the Iron Curtain, for instance through the International Astronomical Union and the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (UN COPUOS).

The conclusion (which is authorless) appears to attempt a synthesis of the individual narratives; however, it leaves the reader uncertain about what developments stemmed from the broader evolution of astronomy and astrophysics – processes that were, to some extent, shared by both the West and the Soviet bloc – and what resulted from the political circumstances or individual personal preferences. Although the conclusion raises numerous questions, it hardly provides any answers.

The book features a name index that includes some historians mentioned in the text and, as stated by the authors, also references details found in the footnotes. The subject index is arranged by categories of institutions, observatories, and organizations. This concept is very useful, although some sorting decisions remain unclear: for example, "Scholar institutions" comprise learned societies, institutes, observatories once again, and even the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education (*sic*), while other political and administrative bodies are categorized under "Other organizations", and universities appear in a separate section, as do "Astronomical organizations and societies". With a little more editorial care, the indexes would be considerably easier to use. It would also have been helpful to include a list of figures, and to embed tables within the text at points where they are most relevant.

We believe that haste may have affected the overall quality of the volume. For example, the book includes photographs both embedded within the text and collected in a separate section titled "Figures" (pp. 224–246). These images, drawn primarily from the collections of Václav Bumba and Luboš Perek – both housed at the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences – with one exception, a photograph of the "Construction of the dome for the school planetarium Nad Hamburkem" from the collection of the observatory and planetarium in Pilsen, illustrate the diversity of materials assembled by the two men. Yet it remains unclear whether this diversity was the intended message. The photographs tell a story of their own, one not made explicit by the authors. Some captions lack clarity; for instance, on page 246, the names are listed without identifying who is who. A contemporary Czech reader might recognize Jiří Grygar as likely being the person in the middle, but for an international readership, only the name of Eugene Cernan (1934–2017), American astronaut of Czech descent, would be immediately familiar. Similarly, the caption accompanying the picture on page 229 could have been more informative, explaining the location of the school planetarium Nad Hamburkem ("Above Hamburg" in English), named after an old hotel at Pilsen train station, or at least referring the reader to page 108, where it is discussed.

Another example that seems to reflect the haste of preparation is, in our view, the "List of Tables", which is not actually a list but rather an appendix containing the tables themselves. This section begins on page 262 and includes thirteen tables spread across eleven pages – sometimes rather tightly packed, as on page 267. The tables combine a variety of topics, ranging from the marital status of male and female students at Brno university to a list of people's observatories (*lidové hvězdárny* in Czech).[14] They are useful for future reference and may encourage readers to explore some of the issues they suggest in greater depth and context. While their placement after the lists of sources implies that they form an appendix, in practice the section functions more as a separate chapter that might have been more effectively integrated into the main text.

While certain aspects of the volume may puzzle readers, the authors have assembled a substantial body of material that will undoubtedly benefit future research – both in the history of astronomy and in the broader context of science in Czechoslovakia. The interviews they conducted, particularly with Luboš Perek and Martin Černohorský, are invaluable sources. These conversations touch on many important topics and reveal numerous intriguing moments and details about the functioning of Czechoslovak astronomy. Together, they provide essential background for contextualization and comparison with developments in

[14] These were observatories focused on popularizing astronomy and natural sciences for the general public, especially amateur astronomers and students. They were built and operated on a cooperative basis, from membership fees, donations, and local communities, often thanks to the involvement of volunteers.

other countries, which will be essential for any future transnational analysis of the standing of Czechoslovak astronomy.

The Introduction reveals that the team held high ambitions for the project, seeking to address new questions related to the history of astronomy – including the Cold War, the functioning of science under communism, and other broader themes. It is regrettable that the authors apparently lacked the time to elaborate fully on these issues and that they seem to place excessive trust in their respondents.

Despite these shortcomings, the book constitutes a collective biography of a generation rather than of a single individual – the first of its kind regarding Czechoslovak astronomers – and it demonstrates how much remains unknown. Among existing collective biographies in the history of Czech and Czechoslovak science, it stands out for its methodological innovation and courage, as well as for its commitment to posing new questions and proposing new explanatory schemes. The authors' effort deserves recognition, even if it sometimes falls short of its own ambitions. For example, the conspicuous allusion in the title to Christopher Hollings's *Mathematics Across the Iron Curtain*[15] is not explicitly addressed in the text. The interpretative limitations may, in part, reflect the fact that the history of the exact sciences in the Czech Republic – despite recent progress and growing prominence in Western scholarship – remains a relatively peripheral field of study.

Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; Czechoslovak astronomy; Cold War; scientific networks; history of science; oral history

DOI 10.51134/sod.2025.043

[15] HOLLINGS, Christopher: *Mathematics Across the Iron Curtain: A History of the Algebraic Theory of Semigroups*. Providence (RI), American Mathematical Society 2014.

Olof Klohr and the Rise and Fall of Scientific Atheism in East Germany

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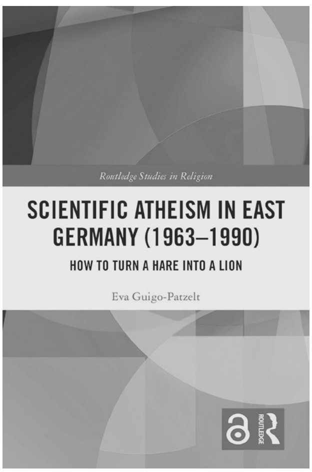

GUIGO-PATZELT, Eva:
Scientific Atheism in East Germany (1963–1990): How to Turn a Hare into a Lion.
Abingdon (UK), Routledge 2025, 256 pages,
ISBN 978-1-03-270096-0.

Eva Guigo-Patzelt is a German historian and Protestant theologian specializing in the history of religion, secularization, and scientific atheism in twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe.[1] Her book *Scientific Atheism in East Germany (1963–1990): How to Turn a Hare into a Lion*, based on her doctoral dissertation, offers a thorough historical reconstruction of the emergence and institutionalization of scientific atheism in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), foregrounding the key changes and actors that shaped its relatively brief history from the post-war formation period to the "moment of 1989".

Placed in a broader historiographical context, *Scientific Atheism in East Germany (1963–1990)* exemplifies a significant shift in scholarly approaches to the subject. While earlier literature – such as the works of Hans-Gerhard Koch[2]

[1] Guigo-Patzelt currently works as a pastor in the United Protestant Church of France in the Paris region.

[2] KOCH, Hans-Gerhard: *Abschaffung Gottes? Das Buch über den Atheismus*: *Der materialistische Atheismus als heutige Existenzform. Geschichte, Problematik, Widerlegung*. Stuttgart,

or Alfred Hoffmann[3] – often treated scientific atheism primarily as an ideological instrument of a repressive regime, Guigo-Patzelt offers a far more nuanced and historically grounded interpretation. In this respect, her book builds on recent scholarship, including Viktoria Smolkin's research on Soviet atheism[4] or my own work,[5] which approach scientific atheism as a specific way of thinking, a form of scientific expertise, and a tool for state governance of society.

Guigo-Patzelt distinguishes her approach above all through her microhistorical perspective and meticulous archival research.[6] While Smolkin conceptualizes Soviet atheism as part of a broader "atheist apparatus", and the author of this review foregrounds comparisons between Moscow, Brno, and Bratislava, Guigo-Patzelt reconstructs the specific trajectory of scientific atheism in East Germany – from its institutional inception through its phase of consolidation, to its reflexive redefinition in the 1980s. Her analysis also remains strongly transnational: she understands scientific atheism as an internationally entangled phenomenon while recognizing its national specificities in each country.

Compared to collective volumes such as *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe*,[7] Guigo-Patzelt offers a more in-depth exploration of a single

Quell-Verlag 1961; IDEM: *Neue Erde ohne Himmel: Der Kampf des Atheismus gegen das Christentum in der „DDR" – Modell einer weltweiten Auseinandersetzung*. Stuttgart, Quell-Verlag 1963.

[3] HOFFMANN, Alfred: *„Mit Gott einfach fertig": Untersuchungen zu Theorie und Praxis des Atheismus im Marxismus-Leninismus der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*. Leipzig, St. Benno 2000.

[4] SMOLKIN, Viktoria: *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 2018.

[5] TESAŘ, Jan: *The History of Scientific Atheism: A Comparative Study of Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union (1954–1991)*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2019.

[6] Guigo-Patzelt worked predominantly with several university archives, including the Archives of the Technical University of Dresden (*Archiv der Technischen Universität Dresden*), the Rostock University Archives (*Universitätsarchiv Rostock*), and the Leipzig University Archives (*Universitätsarchiv Leipzig*). Beyond university holdings, she made extensive use of the Federal Archives (*Bundesarchiv*), in particular the Foundation Archives of the Political Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR (*Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv*, SAPMO), as well as the Berlin Institute for Comparative State–Church Research (*Berliner Institut für vergleichende Staat–Kirche-Forschung*, BISKF). The BISKF holdings related to Olof Klohr proved to be a fundamental source of information. Special mention should also be made of private collections, which shed valuable light on personal details as well as on the organization of scientific atheism in the GDR, notably those of Wolfgang Kleinig, Manfred Düsing, and Jürgen Scholze.

[7] BUBÍK, Tomáš – REMMEL, Atko – VÁCLAVÍK, David (eds.): *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Development of Secularity and Nonreligion*. London – New York, Routledge 2020.

national case, while consistently linking it to broader questions of secularization, ideological education, and scientific expertise. Her book thus bridges the gap between macrohistorical comparative studies and fine-grained case analysis.

One Man's Mission?

The chronological approach adopted by Guigo-Patzelt leads her to begin with an analysis of the period between the end of the Second World War and 1963, when the University of Jena established the first and only Department of Scientific Atheism (*Lehrstuhl für wissenschaftlichen Atheismus*). This period is presented as a story of institutional development intertwined with personal ambition and vision which was embodied above all in Olof Klohr,[8] who became the first chair of the department and emerged as the leading figure of scientific atheism in the GDR right from its inception until the end of socialism. Klohr's capacity to form, shape, direct, and influence the field over several decades proved decisive.

However difficult it may be to overestimate Klohr's influence on the national landscape of scientific atheism, it is important to emphasize that the project also attracted other experts (even if their number was likely smaller than the community contributing to the discipline in neighbouring Czechoslovakia)[9] and that there were significant institutional and ideological preconditions for the emergence of scientific atheism. The author makes clear that these were a combination of factors: the adoption of the Soviet model; the Central and Eastern European communist regime's increasing need to control the religious sphere; and parallel efforts to "scientify" ideological work. Within this framework, scientific atheism served as a tool of ideological control while gradually establishing itself as a legitimate academic field, largely through the activities of Klohr and a small circle of other actors.

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[8] Olof Klohr (1927–1994) studied social sciences in Leipzig, earning a doctorate in Halle with a dissertation on the biologist Ernst Haeckel, and a habilitation in Jena with a critique of Catholic philosophy and theology. In the 1950s and early 1960s, he taught religious sociology at several East German universities. Klohr was deeply involved in the multi-year discussions on the general reorganization of the social sciences at the University of Jena, which reached a particularly intense phase in 1967–1968. Among several competing and controversial reform proposals, a model that eliminated scientific atheism as a distinct discipline ultimately prevailed. Subsequently, Klohr was reassigned to teach Marxism-Leninism at the Engineering College for Seafaring in Warnemünde/Wustrow, where he remained until 1990.

[9] Cf. TESAŘ, J.: *The History of Scientific Atheism*, pp. 177–185.

The author opens the book by tracing Olof Klohr's efforts to establish scientific atheism as an independent academic discipline with its own research program, methodology, and publishing agenda that could withstand international comparison within the Eastern Bloc. During the 1960s, Klohr grounded his work in the assumption that the modern natural sciences are inherently atheistic, as they operate with a materialistic interpretation of the world. This approach, however, proved limited: it was largely polemical, often reductive, and struggled to define the very concept of "atheism". As a result, at this stage scientific atheism defined itself primarily in negative terms (as opposition to religion), rather than as a positive, autonomous worldview. While Klohr's approach largely aligned with Soviet scientific atheism of the period, it differed markedly from atheist thinking in 1960s Czechoslovakia.[10]

During this period, a team coalesced around Klohr with the aim of conducting empirical studies of religiosity and secularization in the GDR. These studies had not only cognitive but also explicitly normative functions: they were intended to demonstrate the inevitability of religion's "withering away" and also to provide an empirical basis for a more effective policy of atheization. Once again, this development closely followed Soviet and Czechoslovak efforts to study religion using sociological methods (forming part of a broader trend across the Eastern Bloc in the 1960s, closely linked to the rehabilitation of sociology in the Soviet Union at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, when the discipline ceased to be regarded as a bourgeois pseudoscience and was reintegrated into the socialist academic landscape). As Eva Guigo-Patzelt demonstrates, Klohr was keenly aware that the GDR could not develop the discipline in isolation but depended on contacts with peers in other socialist countries. These transnational exchanges serve in the book as case studies that allow the author to highlight differences between individual countries – for instance, the greater openness of Czechoslovak researchers to dialogue with believers, or the stronger degree of institutional support found in the Soviet Union.

Transformation and Expansion against Indifference

The 1970s and 1980s are identified by Eva Guigo-Patzelt as a phase of "renewal, rise, and peak" of scientific atheism in East Germany. She examines how,

[10] While a predominantly negative and oppositional definition of atheism dominated GDR discourse, Czechoslovak scholars experimented with defining it as a Marxist "philosophy of life" or as a form of Marxist humanism grounded in the principle of dialogue. No comparable understanding of scientific atheism existed in the Soviet Union. With the onset of Czechoslovak normalization, however, such approaches were branded as revisionist and formally condemned. (See TESAŘ, J.: *The History of Scientific Atheism*, pp. 203–212.)

following a period of institutional weakening at the end of the 1960s, scientific atheism successfully reestablished itself as a significant academic and ideological discipline. A decisive moment in this process of renewal was the creation of new research collectives, particularly – but not exclusively – around Olof Klohr, who, after being transferred to the Maritime Engineering School (*Ingenieurhochschule für Seefahrt*) in Warnemünde-Wustrow, managed to rebuild a robust research base by mobilizing his extensive network of contacts. The author maps in detail how scientific atheism expanded into other universities and research institutions during this phase and how it managed to gain new political and financial support. Central to this consolidation was the establishment of a nationwide Permanent Research Group on Scientific Atheism (*Ständige Arbeitsgruppe Wissenschaftlicher Atheismus*), which coordinated research, teaching, and popularization activities.

With the advent of the 1970s, a clear thematic transformation of scientific atheism becomes visible. During this decade, the focus shifted away from direct confrontation with religion toward questions of everyday life, value orientation, and worldview education. Scientific atheists increasingly turned their attention to phenomena such as religious indifference, secularized forms of spirituality, and so-called implicit atheism. Guigo-Patzelt convincingly demonstrates that this thematic reorientation was largely a response to the population's growing disinterest in both religious and atheist issues – a phenomenon that scientific atheists themselves called "indifference". As part of this broader shift, the author analyses how scientific atheism sought to establish itself within the official educational curriculum, while also highlighting the obstacles and internal contradictions that accompanied this process. One of her key findings is that the dissemination of an atheist worldview proved far less smooth and effective than its proponents had envisioned.

Courses in scientific atheism were introduced across a wide range of educational institutions, from universities and technical colleges to vocational schools. Although these lectures were often formally mandatory, they frequently encountered low levels of student engagement, a shortage of qualified teachers, and a pervasive sense of "worldview fatigue" in practice. As a result, scientific atheism found itself in a paradoxical position: strongly supported at the ideological level from above, yet met with passivity and disinterest from below.

Crucially, Guigo-Patzelt emphasizes that these developments were not merely anonymous byproducts of the policy of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED). Rather, they depended heavily on the personal commitment and initiative of a small group of dedicated scientific atheists, among them (apart from Olof Klohr) Hans Lutter.[11] During the 1970s

[11] Hans Lutter (1928–2009) was a Marxist scholar whose career focused on atheist theory and the critique of religion in the GDR. From the 1960s onward, he worked in the field of scientific

and 1980s, Klohr emerged as the main coordinator of scientific atheism education within the framework of the so-called Marxist-Leninist basic studies. At the same time, he had to contend with persistent structural problems, including limited space in educational plans, resistance from some teachers and students, and a widespread tendency to reduce teaching to a formal ritual largely devoid of content. Consequently, the teaching of scientific atheism oscillated between ideological dogmatism and attempts at a more open, humanistic approach, often depending on the individual lecturer.

Beyond questions of education, the book also addresses the transformation of the relationship between scientific atheism and religion in East Germany during the 1970s. Guigo-Patzelt shows how scientific atheists gradually moved from a confrontational stance toward religion to a more pragmatic and, in some cases, cooperative approach. This shift reflected a broader change in the ideological and practical conception of atheization: from efforts aimed at the direct elimination of religion toward strategies of "management", "monitoring", and partial integration into the socialist project.

Scientific atheists, particularly those associated with Olof Klohr, increasingly acknowledged that religion could not simply be "removed", but had to be treated as a historically conditioned and socially variable phenomenon. This approach was reflected in research agendas, teaching practices, and evolving relationships with church institutions.

Balancing Loyalty and Relevance

The final part of the book addresses the development of scientific atheism in East Germany during the 1980s, a period in which the discipline sought theoretical renewal and new forms of societal anchoring. In chapters 6–7, Guigo-Patzelt traces in detail how scientific atheists attempted to respond to growing religious plurality, broader cultural changes, and, above all, the pervasive worldview indifference that had become a defining feature of East German society by this time. The 1980s thus emerge as a reflective phase, in which scientific atheism struggled to redefine itself – no longer merely as a tool of ideological education, but as a discipline aspiring to offer a more nuanced understanding of modern humanity.

atheism and later in Marxist religious studies. In 1974, he founded a research group at the Güstrow College of Education (*Pädagogische Hochschule Güstrow*) that analysed Protestantism in East Germany. Even after rejecting the term "scientific atheism" as unscientific in 1988, he continued to publish and teach on atheism and the role of religion under socialism. In the post-GDR period, he served as editor of the *Berliner Dialog-Hefte*, using the series as a platform to promote secular and freethought perspectives.

The author advances the thesis that, in the 1980s, certain ideological frameworks began to loosen, giving rise to a more open and differentiated approach to religion. Scientific atheists began to reflect on the existence of diverse forms of irreligion, including agnosticism, religious indifference, and "implicit atheism". Concurrently, efforts emerged to connect scientific atheism with humanistic values and with questions about the meaning of life, ethics, and interpersonal relationships. This shift manifested itself both in theoretical writings and in practical initiatives aimed at worldview education, cultural policy, and youth research.

The apex of this development, the author argues, consisted in attempts to establish dialogue with religious actors. Guigo-Patzelt highlights that, in some cases, genuine cooperation emerged between scientific atheists and representatives of the churches, for instance through the organization of discussion forums or joint research on the value orientations of the younger generation. These initiatives were frequently launched from below and reflected an effort to overcome entrenched ideological schemas. At the same time, they were severely constrained by structural conditions, including persistent distrust from the state authorities, the rigidity of the SED organs, and fears of the excessive autonomy of religious actors. Nevertheless, according to the author, they represented a significant shift from earlier confrontational logic and even certain subversiveness, as they constantly balanced openness with loyalty to the regime. At this stage, even the very concept of "scientific atheism" came under scrutiny. During the 1980s, proposals appeared to rename the discipline, for example, as the "Marxist-Leninist study of religion" (*marxistisch-leninistische Religionswissenschaft*), reflecting efforts to adopt a broader and less ideologically loaded definition. Terms such as "dialogue", "openness", and "cultural heritage" began to replace the earlier rhetoric of struggle, exposure, and unmasking. Yet Guigo-Patzelt cautions that this linguistic shift was not always accompanied by a real change in attitudes; in many cases, it amounted to strategic adaptation rather than profound transformation. As a result, scientific atheism in this phase vacillated between attempts at modernization and the inertia of entrenched ideological structures. Scientific atheists in the GDR, as the author maintains, increasingly recognized that their original mission – the atheization of society – was failing, and that new sources of relevance would have to be sought.

Broader Contexts

Scientific atheism in East Germany never attained the institutional strength achieved in the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia. As Guigo-Patzelt convincingly shows, it lacked a stable institutional base, its political support was inconsistent, and it often remained marginal and isolated within academic circles.

Nevertheless, it managed to establish a distinctive scholarly field that combined research, teaching, and ideological practice.

At the same time, Guigo-Patzelt carefully delineates the paradoxical success of the GDR's secularization policy and the role of scientific atheism within it. Although scientific atheism as a discipline disappeared with the collapse of the communist regime, its core objective – mass secularization – was largely realized. The author draws on empirical research indicating that only a minority of the former East German population identifies with religion, and shows that a form of "practical atheism of indifference" became the dominant mode of irreligiosity. Yet this outcome also marked the failure of scientific atheism as a project, since it had aimed not at indifference but at the cultivation of an active, ideologically grounded worldview. In this sense, the author argues, secularization occurred not because of, but rather despite, the efforts of Klohr and his colleagues.

The "moment of 1989" further illustrates that even during the collapse of the regime, scientific atheists remained at once loyal and critical. Some participated in public debates about the future of the relationship between the state/party ideology and religion, while others attempted to redefine their discipline as a "Marxist-Leninist study of religion". The author convincingly demonstrates that scientific atheism was not merely a relic of the past, but that its representatives were capable of reflecting societal changes – even if their voices ultimately remained unheard under the new political conditions.

The book under review deserves attention in two main respects. First, the author takes into account the full complexity of the phenomenon under study and explicitly rejects simplistic dichotomies such as "science versus ideology" or "regime versus victim". Instead, Guigo-Patzelt situates scientific atheism within the broader process of the "scientification of society". From this perspective, scientific atheism appears as a discipline that aimed not only to interpret reality but also to actively shape it – through research, teaching, and propaganda. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of specific actors, their motivations, strategies, and internal contradictions. Second, her findings demonstrate that even within an ideologically charged discipline, empirically valuable insights could emerge, and that scientific atheists often engaged in intense internal debates about the purpose and methods of their work. It thus becomes clear that scientific atheism was far from a monolithic ideological enterprise but rather a dynamic field marked by diverse directions, ambitions, and conflicts.

In conclusion, *Scientific Atheism in East Germany* constitutes a substantial contribution to contemporary research on scientific atheism. Compared to existing literature, it stands out for its archival depth, analytical precision, and its ability to integrate the histories of ideology, science, and religion. At the same time, it opens up new avenues for further research, raising questions about the long-term cultural legacy of scientific atheism, its transformations after 1990, and the extent

to which its traces persist in contemporary forms of secularism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords:

German Democratic Republic (GDR); scientific atheism; communism; Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED); Eastern Bloc; secularization; Olof Klohr; *Lehrstuhl für wissenschaftlichen Atheismus;* ideology and religion

DOI 10.51134/sod.2025.049