# Foreword

How is one to provide a convincing explanation for the fact that state socialism in East Central Europe existed for more than forty years even though most of the people living under such regimes did not share the basic principles of communist ideology? Why did these societies passively accept socialism for so long even as standards of living were worsening? What was the long-term stability of communist domination based on, and why ultimately did it fall apart in several weeks or, in some cases, merely days? These questions were considered by scholars in the research project "The Socialist Dictatorship as a *Sinnwelt*," which was jointly carried out at the Institute of Contemporary History, Prague, and the Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam, from 2007 to 2010. From a comparative perspective, and from the viewpoints of cultural and social history and the history of everyday life, our research teams—comprised both of PhD students and postdoctoral researchers from several countries of East Central Europe—undertook to explain how the communist dictatorships were established, perpetuated, and ultimately collapsed. We started from the general assumption that in order to understand the survival and then fall of state socialism, we would have to examine what lay behind the power politics and raw ideology.

We therefore looked for the sources of communist domination, and support for it, in a space we think useful to call the "prepolitical."[1] This wide sphere comprised nonideological notions, values, and practices, which to most of the people living under these regimes seemed "normal" in everyday life. They included ideals like peace and quiet, security, social progress, welfare, life in consumerism in practice, efficient management, the vision of "self-realization," and feelings of belonging to the nation. These prepolitical ideals—prepolitical because they were not typical only of the communist dictatorship and its ideology—were, in our opinion, key to state socialism. This is particularly true after 1956 when, with the fall of Stalinism, the formerly unambiguous ideological revolutionary legitimacy of the dictatorships was considerably weakened.

We found inspiration chiefly in contemporary German research on the history of society in modern dictatorships. Already in the 1980s, proponents of the school of *Alltagsgeschichte* focused on society as a whole in order to understand the astonishing success of the Nazi dictatorship. Their motivation was as much

[1] Wilfried Thaa, *Die Wiedergeburt des Politischen: Zivilgesellschaft und Legitimitätskonflikt in den Revolutionen von 1989* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1996).

a matter of ethics as it was one of scholarship. They sought to show that the existence of the Nazi dictatorship was supported not only by reactionary elites, but also, actively or passively, by practically everyone. This raised awkward questions about the behavior of the masses. After the changes of late 1989, German historians of everyday life applied this approach to their research on communist East Germany. They did not see "power" as an independent force affecting society from the outside and they most often used the term "domination" (*Herrschaft*), understood as the mutual relationship between rulers and ruled; the relationship could not, they argued, be limited simply to obedience and the carrying out of orders. If this relationship was to function over the long term, both the entity giving orders and the entity following them had somehow to understand the power relationship and to accept it as their own. This prepolitical acceptance of the status quo took place largely in the "banality" of everyday life: it was not usually controlled by the conscious acceptance or rejection of communist ideology; rather, it occurred intuitively, on the basis of everyday interests and notions. Thus, historians of everyday life did not question the unequal distribution of power in the socialist dictatorship. They did, however, question the notion that those who got the short end of the stick in this relationship were completely powerless. The power relationships that existed were always the result of interaction between the official ideological lines and the way people adopted them in their living world (*Lebenswelt*): with their families, at work, in their spare time. In the communist dictatorships, too, domination could only exist if jointly formed with society, from below.

Hence, the term *Sinnwelt*. In our understanding of the term, *Sinn* denotes not only "meaning" or "sense" as it does in the classic hermeneutic tradition. We were concerned with the broader mental conception and social construction of the world, its "Idea" or "Ideal" as opposed to the narrowly defined world of the material reality of socialism. This *Sinnwelt* comprised the everyday "little utopia" of a wide variety of actors: rank-and-file communists, dissidents, professional economists, housewives, urban planners, and local policemen. It can therefore be usefully understood as the space of the "prepolitical acceptance" of socialism, a zone in which historical actors daily constructed the meaning of the existing social order and its legitimacy was repeatedly reestablished by everyday transactions. The range of English translations of the term *Sinnwelt*—from "conceptual world," a world of reflection and conscious strategies, on the one hand, to "mental world," an area of unreflected social practices mediating the feeling of "normality," on the other—illustrates the breadth of the phenomenon, but also suggests the pitfalls of transferring a term from one language environment to another.

The transfer of methods and approaches—in our case chiefly from German to Czech scholarship—emphasized the need to release research on communism from the straitjacket of national history. Even twenty years after its emergence, scholars of contemporary history in practically all of the countries of East Central Europe were still infatuated almost solely with their own national fate. Contemporary history was constituted, among other things, as, to use Hans Rothfels's words, "the epoch that has been experienced by those still alive."[2] It is this shared experience of the living generations—further supported by the boom in "memory studies" and their growing role in research on the most recent history—that have resulted in the interests of scholars working in the new discipline being primarily oriented to the past of their own national communities. But the situation changed after the optimistic "transformational" story about the irreversible transition from dictatorship to democracy (the dominant topic of the history of communism in the 1990s) fell apart in the purgatory of post-socialist conflicts. Contemporary history ceased to fulfil its predominant role of providing identity and political legitimacy, emphasizing the repulsiveness of the communist dictatorship and the virtues of liberal democracy. In historical research, "communist totalitarianism" is no longer taken out of its historical context as the opposite of democracy, but has instead become a standard historical phenomenon in a particular time and place. This largely natural historicization of socialist dictatorships opens up the possibility of comparative studies: if communism is becoming an historical phenomenon with a clear beginning and end—like, say, the Great Depression—then it is obviously not a national exception, but a general manifestation of European modernity.

More than a decade has passed since our group carried out its research. In that time, important changes in topics and concepts have taken place in scholarship on communist dictatorships. A view of state socialist history which emphasizes the interconnectedness of domination and society is no longer a marginal, "supplementary" approach, but is becoming a dominant conception. The history of everyday life is no longer a term of abuse used when speaking of people assumed to be making light of dictatorial regimes. Comparative and transnational approaches are slowly but surely gaining the upper hand over views that are purely national.

We are glad that with our project we may contribute to this gradual paradigm shift. This is the first volume to present the international public with comprehensive research from a wide range of the scholars who have rallied round the *Sinnwelt* flag. We believe that researching and thinking about what was

[2] Hans Rothfels, "Zeitgeschichte als Aufgabe," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, no. 1 (1953): 1–8.

conditioned by the long-term conformist behavior of most of the communist states' populations, and asking why at the end of the 1980s a considerable number of people decided to reject this authoritarian world, can also provide a thought-provoking intellectual exercise to scholars looking at other sociopolitical conditions—including those we are living in now.

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