

14. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

Farewell to Despotism: De-Stalinization in the Soviet Union and East-Central Europe

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Conference language: German

21 and 22 February 2014

Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: Among historians the de-Stalinization process is perceived as a half-hearted and failed attempt to reform the dictatorship. Is this interpretation still justified?

Under the sway of the Cold War, the West took very little notice of all the changes taking place in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin. And in the Soviet Union after 1964 it was forbidden to talk about Khrushchev and de-Stalinization. On closer consideration, however, de-Stalinization was a tremendous civilizing achievement that freed millions of people from the nightmare of the Stalinist reign of terror.

Khrushchev ended not only the terror and the mass violence but he portrayed what had happened as a tragic event. In my view the secret speech he held on February 1956 at the 20th Party Congress is not to be seen as just another move in the power struggle but as the confession of someone responsible for criminal deeds and who was suffering from guilt. De-Stalinization was a moral project that was implemented against the will of party officials. It ended the violence within the party itself, bound the secret police to observe law and order and thus gave the citizens of the Soviet Union a similar guarantee. It is only against the background of the Soviet Union's experience of tyranny under Stalin that we can understand Khrushchev's achievement in freeing the leadership and their subjects from extreme acts of violence. The colloquium offered a successful framework for a small group of experts to critically reflect on de-Stalinization from this perspective.

BCZ: How was de-Stalinization assimilated in East-Central Europe and in the West?

We also discussed this question intensively. The decisive aspect would seem to be that in East-Central Europe there was no mass terror as in the Soviet Union. There was no memory of civil war, collectivization, and 1937. So what came to be addressed in

Moscow was the Soviet Union addressing its past. For the communist reformers in East-Central Europe, de-Stalinization was above all an indicator that changes in their own countries were possible. The uprisings in Poland and in Hungary in 1956 were a direct consequence of de-Stalinization. This was not the case in East Germany because even in the latter years of Stalin's reign there had been no mass terror there. And yet after the uprisings in Poland and Hungary were put down, political reforms became possible that would not have transpired without de-Stalinization.

In the West, above all in the United States, de-Stalinization was registered but falsely evaluated because the Cold War limited one's ability to see clearly. The Soviet Union was and remained a diplomatic enemy and therefore the West was unable to correctly perceive what Khrushchev had effected within the Soviet Union. The communist parties of Western Europe felt that de-Stalinization discredited the Soviet Union. That is why it was only marginally popular even here.

BCZ: What were the long-term consequences of de-Stalinization?

Khrushchev's de-Stalinization placed the power of the Soviet Union on a new basis; it made decisions and judgments of the political leadership less capricious, it generated trust and guaranteed a certain order. The Communist Party transformed itself into an institution of specialists and technocrats, the secret service became an institution of surveillance. Not violence and terror but direction and education became the criteria of government. The ruling power no longer acquired its legitimacy through ideology and the leader but through prosperity and consumerism. The political leadership tethered its fate to the promise that it would look after the people's welfare. When this promise was ultimately broken, their rule had no legitimization. But de-Stalinization above all generated a spirit of contrariness, dissent and opposition. It was the beginning of the end of the totalitarian dictatorship.

BCZ: Will you be doing further research on de-Stalinization?

The question as to the link between trust and violence permeates my work. In the case of de-Stalinization the question is even more intriguing because a policy of violence could have been pursued even after the death of Stalin—but was not. This is only one aspect of de-Stalinization that particularly interests me and about which I will continue to reflect on and write. Another book is planned.