

Report on the *Wer aber ist die Partei? History and Historiography* research project at the Open Society Archive by Tamás Kende

It is not easy to report on an ongoing research. And mine is an ongoing one. But the two months I was able spend with intensive research at the OSA's reading room, consulting more than 100 containers allow me to formulate certain preliminary results. 320/1/2/ boxes 271, 280, 297, 310, 311, 449; 300/30/25/ boxes 1,2,3; 300/30/30/ box 21; 300/30/24/ boxes 7,8,9,10,11,12,13; 300/80/1/ boxes 122-126. 182. 209 - 210.322-324. 424 - 435.450. 678.679.680.681. 682.683.684.945.946.947. 948.949.950.951. 952.953.954.1138-1151. The sources that are contained in them relate historiographical as well ideological and political aspects of past-evaluating and re-evaluating by the given CP-s, and their presses. They are mostly press cuttings from Soviet (Russian), Czech, Slovak, Serbian and Croatian papers and periodicals, so called background and/or status reports made by the RFE-RL's experts, or press surveys compiled for the RFE-RL staff on the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia.

Especially useful was to see in a pre-regulated way (special thank to the OSA staff) the cross references of the given texts and between the always changing national and international "general lines" in party histories and the understandings of the history of Communism. Cross references, or discourses (with other words: competing narratives) could be found not only on the two main sides of the bipolar ("Western vs. Eastern") historiographical front (to use the favorite expression of the Soviet official historiography) but in given periods between Czech (or Slovak) historians and ideologues from one hand and Soviet ones on the other (especially in 1968-69), between Yugoslavs and Soviets in the 1960s and the 1970s, or between Poles and Soviets etc. Extraordinary interesting *addenda* were found on the inner-party discourses on the researched topic in the sources of the OSA relating the 1960s-1980s Soviet Union, the 1960-s and late 1980s Czechoslovakia, and in the containers of the Balkan section I could find numerous valuable direct as well as indirect materials regarding the competing in a single (Yugoslav) Party historical reconstruction of the contemporary *Zeitgeschichte*. Special interest was paid (and specially interesting sources were found) to the way how Marxism have been officially interpreted in different parties and in different periods, and in every cases the actual understanding and interpretation of Leninism put an end in every cases to the non-eschatological alternative Marxist path seeking in every *Zeitgeschichte* from Prague to Beograd.

The final results will be published as a separate paper.

Object of the reserarch: Party history and partisan historiography of CPs in crisis. Despite the fact that in every academic institutions of Eastern Europe historians were to write Marxist histories, there was no single Marxist historiography in the region. This phenomenon is only partially was the outcome of the total lack of Marxist historiography prior the Communist takeovers. The so called Marxist (in most cases Leninist-Stalinist) historiography was an either positivist or *Geistesgeschichte* history-writing aiming to prove the scientific and socialist nature of a new system, its deep historical roots. We are talking about a system that openly declared her Marxist (socialist and revolutionary) nature. Contrary to the concepts of Marxism-Leninism Marxism in historical (and other social) sciences is (was and will be) a method of cognition. The official Marxist-Leninist historiography rejected the Marxist

method of cognition. From the very institutionalized beginnings it turned into a rather primitive eschatology especially in *Zeitgeschichte* and the very Party history.

### I. Preliminary remarks

There are two seemingly controversial approaches on and of the history of the East- and Central European Communist Parties. The first (most recently not too frequently used one) is the so called Communist eschatological approach on the subject that has become a kind of “canon” after the communist takeovers in the region; the second is the anti-Communist conspiracy theories on the subject developed mostly in the period of the Cold War. There are “surprisingly” parallel elements in these approaches that are characteristic for both the official Communist and anti-Communist historiography. The most important parallel element that never misses in them is the “re-construction” of a mythical “Great Plan” written by Marx or in most of the cases by Lenin’s *What has to be done?* Obviously, the interpretation of this above mentioned “Great Plan” varies regarding the given authors’ political views.

Of course “deviations” has taken place in the interpretation(s) of the Party histories in the East and in the West after the death of Stalin. Conspiracy theory and the Great Plan for example have turned into the Blueprint theory. But on both sides of the bipolar historiography a kind of mythical Plan has remained.

### II. Great Crisis and Great Plan

Some of the East-European Communist and Workers’ Parties have begun to re-evaluate their past in an organized manner, when they found themselves in crisis, more correctly when they acknowledged and comprehended the crisis of the system. Not all of the East-European Communist Parties wanted to confront with the crisis of the existing socialism, the last sign of which was the perestroika. The organized re-evaluation of the communist past that began in the 1980’s was a new phenomenon in the history of the East-European Communist Parties. While the intellectual attempts of the reform-communists in 1968 in Czechoslovakia were spontaneous progresses – in the field of party historiography these were mere efforts to break with Stalinism –, during the last decade of the existing socialism the parties themselves wanted to manage these intellectual experiments. During the 1980’s there were three major efforts to re-evaluate the socialist development and the history of the party in an **organized** manner. The first was that of the Polish United Workers’ Party, the second was in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, while the third took place in the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party. In all the three cases two factors were determinative: the sense and apperception of the crisis of both the countries and the parties, and the inner challenge that were generated by the non-canonized, “alternative” party history and system-criticism, which had to be answered anyway. The main challenge was the reinterpretation of the Great Plan: to seat the confessed crisis into a new-style eschatology. Meanwhile it was evident that the confessed crisis could not be the actual incarnation of the Great Plan.

The PUWP was the first among the communist parties of the socialist countries which tried to answer the questions around “the clarification of the conflicts that happened in the history of

the peoples' Poland". The party leadership destined itself to it in the 9<sup>th</sup>, extraordinary Party Congress in 1981. This was evaluated by the reform-communists of the system changing as a new historical event that has opened the road to reform thinking. During the Polish system changing for the reform-communists who refloated the PUWP, the dramatic 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1981 that raised Jaruzelski to power seemed unequivocally as the headspring of the movement towards the peaceful transition. The report defined Polish socialism as a historical necessity, and defined the deep-in-crisis PUWP as the natural leading force of the socialism understood as historical necessity. For that very reason the Kubiák committee conceived the party to be not only appropriate, but even predestinate to lead the Polish society forward.

Party history had a unique place among all the other social sciences in East-Europe, especially in the Soviet Union. One of the great promises of the 1960s' was exactly that history, more strictly the party history will be the most exact and most important science. *The Questions of the History of the CPSU*, the official organ of soviet party history launched a dispute with the collaboration of party historians and ideological social scientists about "What like the new school-book on the history of CPSU should have been?" The author of the exordial study defined the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as nothing else than "Marxism-Leninism in praxis". For decades, the chosen authors had written its history in such a manner that in their works they mostly had re-talked, digested ideological, political decisions or resolutions of all sorts, and then using sober quantity and quality concrete historical material they had presented the positive and planned activity of the CPSU and the soviet state in the realization of these decisions.

A historian collective with 25 members worked in Moscow under the leadership of the "architect of the perestroika", A. N. Yakovlev, with the political and professional aim to write the latest and most credible history of the CPSU for the "wide audience". The "new" soviet party history, which was never finished, was the longest to make among the new histories of the reform parties. The careful ones knew very well that impossible to avoid asking and answering the question: whether history justified the truth of Bolshevism? When the inner barriers of the perestroika had broken, it became evident also in Moscow that illusion was the expectation of the intellectuals when they thought that after the détente of formal and informal censorship, great works will come to light from the shady drawers of the writing-desks. During the perestroika the drawers opened, and it became clear that the drawers of the official party historians are rather airy. They could add only themselves and their oeuvre to the new party history. However, it seemed to be insufficient a bit in the turn of the 1980s' and 1990s'. The party historians and social scientists who unfreely held inside themselves the undiscovered dilemmas of the 1950s' and 1960s', were hardly able to reflect the challenges of the new times.

Compared to the former official party history it was undoubtedly a step forward that the authors of the *Chapters* have brake with the apologetic hagiographic approach in the center of which stood the Leninian teaches.

The Lenin of the reform history of the reform party was no more a theoretic who gave scientific guidance to all of the phenomena of the soviet past and future, but a pragmatic politician who every time recognized the historical necessities. The authors did not connect the tragedies of the history of the Soviet Union, which compared to their precursors they intended to disclose fairly and honestly, to the theoretical and political work of Lenin. Albeit some of them have recognized that the fundamentals of the permanently interim state party system that from time to time was shocked by crises, were created already in Lenin's life and under his leadership, they did not search the roots of these tragedies in the ideology and politics of the Bolshevik party, just the contrary, in the deviations from it. The reform-communist party historians of the end of the 1980s' found the essence of the politics of the Bolshevik revolution and the first leader of the Bolshevik party in humanism, social democracy and modernization. For 1990-1991 only its past have remained from the legitimacy of the system. Paradoxically enough, the leaders and experts of the system wanted to radically break exactly with their own past to surmount the crisis. Nevertheless, they could not allow anybody to „make a clean slate” of the past, to rewrite it from the beginning till the end, not at least because of existential reasons. The demand for the dialectical re-evaluation of the “Leninian heredity” was born from this pressure, and its apparent contradictions they bypassed by uttering the historical necessity.

The sharpest experiment of the “dialectical rescue” of the Leninian heredity was the collective monograph that drafted for the readers the last two decades of the soviet party and society. The monograph was constructed as the last chapters of the *Chapters* to 1990. Besides Zhuravlyov one could find among the authors some members of the collective of the Yakovlevian *Chapters*, former authors of the *Questions of the History of the CPSU* and the *Communist*. The aim of this party history monograph was to present that the perestroika, which was initiated by the party in April 1985, was the only way out of the “pre-crisis” situation of the time. According to the authors the perestroika itself was nothing else than historical necessity. In pursuance of the actualized Leninian teaching, socialism embodies all the good things that mankind ever have created or will create. In 1990 for the ideologues of socialism it seemed evident that socialism has to be found somewhere else – in developed capitalism. But being faithful (reform) communists they could not refuse the demand of reaching and building of socialism. For this they accounted the capitalist relations to be the most effective way, and they thought that it fully corresponds to the actualized Leninian principles.

The barriers of the reform-communist type re-evaluation of the past are shown the best by the fact that the past of the “communism, Bolshevism” never has become a moral problem of the reform-communist CPSU. Since for them the main historical crime of the Stalinian age and the Brezhnevian decades remained that the Soviet Union has dropped behind the mainstream of modernization and civilization, it is not surprising that in 1990 the CPSU “definitely condemned” every assaults against the Party and Lenin, the founder of the system.

As the American journalist-historian, David Remnick wrote smartly in his successful book, *Lenin's Tomb*, the first moment of the fall of soviet communism was exactly the same, when the exploration and re-writing of its history has begun. No doubt that the historical legitimacy

of the East-European socialist countries and communist parties could have been questioned by the new party histories written – but not accomplished – by the old party historians. But the party history in the socialist countries was just one of the pillars of the “unconscious” ideology. The scientific discipline called party history, in the form as it was intended to cultivate in our region, has deceased without ever reaching its “high peak”. Its main intellectual achievement was its own self-destruction, and by this a tiny, but symbolic assistance to the elimination of the system itself. Taking everything into account we should fairly say, that this assistance was an involuntary one.