

Dissidents as figures of truth (since the 1970s)

Date: 15.-16. July 2021

Venue: online

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In cooperation with

- Faculty Centre for Transdisciplinary Historical and Cultural Studies, University of Vienna
- Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe, GWZO, Leipzig
- Research Group "Praxeologies of Truth"/University of Erfurt
- Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences

International conference organised by the research initiative (East) European Epistemologies: Studies in the Reflexive Pluralisation of the World in the 20th Century (Friedrich Cain, Dietlind Hüchtker, Bernhard Kleeberg, Karin Reichenbach and Jan Surman)

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What do Andrei Sakharov, Noam Chomsky, a 19th century sect of German Catholics, and today's mask opponents have in common? They all have at times been called, and identified themselves as, dissidents – "those who do not agree." But while all of them were convinced that they presented "the truth," opposing mainstream religious, social, political or intellectual climate, they did not meet with the same reactions – for instance, Corona dissidents and Soviet dissidents seem to stand on the opposed poles of the political and social spectrum.

Today, we almost intuitively associate dissidents with Soviet intellectual nonconformists, and those from other countries of the Eastern Bloc, with towering figures like Václav Havel, Jacek Kuroń or Andriej Sacharow. At our conference, we want to look more closely at how the figure of the "dissident" became constructed and solidified across the Iron Curtain and after the fall of the Soviet Union. We will focus on practices, techniques, and media settings which (co)produce the dissident as a (mostly male) "truth figure" (Kleeberg 2019), which includes practices of staging oneself, and ways of embodying the (epistemic) values and virtues associated with this figure. As truth figures are historically heterogeneous, so is "the dissident," varying from person to person, group to group, from country to country, and changing over time which itself is a matter of our inquiry. Yet, as a truth figure, it became an important point of reference, used as self-designation by a variety of people from different poles of the political spectrum, not only across Soviet and Post-Soviet space. Central Europe, for instance, in the 1990s witnessed a mushrooming of dissidents, who had not been identifiable as such before. Obviously, a specific relation to truth is crucial for the figure of the dissident not only as it is understood today: from ancient parrhesiastes to today's dissidents, speaking the truth to power, being "true to oneself," "living the truth," has been essential.

As the imaginary of truth and a depiction of concrete instructions about how to authenticate truth, truth figures form an intersection between local and transnational dissidence-discourses. In Soviet times, the dissident was created locally: in oppositional media like samizdat and through practices like creating rumors, and as enemies of the state

through state media. At the same time, Radio Free Europe, Nobel Prizes, tamizdat or interviews in important journals like *Le Monde* or *The New Yorker* largely contributed to the emergence of dissident as a truth figure both locally and abroad (cf. Szulecki 2019). Some – like Russian feminist dissidents – were publicly recognized as such only abroad (Vasyakina/Kozlov/Talaver 2020).

In our conference we want to approach the question of the life and afterlife of the “dissident” as a figure of truth with particular attention to post-Soviet space. We are particularly interested in contributions addressing following topics:

- How, with which practices, strategies and arguments, by whom, and in which medial settings were/are dissidents staged as figures of truth and how were/are they delegitimized?
- How was/is the figure of the legitimate, “truthful” dissident presented and represented, how is it affected by class, gender, religion or ethnic/national origin?
- How does the alleged authenticity of the dissident as a truth figure affect disputes about truth, how does this kind of subjectified truth relate to other forms of truth?
- What role did the international recognition as well as transnational networks play in the stabilization (or destabilization) of the figure of the dissident? How did this recognition translate across borders?
- How did controversies about dissidents and attempts to delegitimize them affect their role as truth figures – be these controversies instigated by Soviet propaganda, independently of it, or coming from inside of the dissidence movement(s)?
- How did the figure of the dissident change after the breakup of the Soviet Union up until today? Which groups assumed the truth associated with dissidents for themselves by designating themselves as dissidents (historical or “new dissidents”), and what does this tell us about more general transformations of truth regimes?
- What discussions about “legitimacy” and “illegitimacy” of dissidence and dissidents were taking place over the last decades? What processes of inclusion and exclusion were at play here?

Please send us short proposals (up to 300 words) by 28 January 2021 along with a CV or a link to your online CV. Please direct proposals and questions to jan.surman@gmail.com.

Quoted literature

Vasyakina, Oksana / Kozlov, Dmitri / Talaver, Sasha (eds.) *Feministskij samizdat: 40 let spustya* [Feminist Samizdat: 40 years later]. Moscow: Common place 2020.

Bernhard Kleeberg, Post Post-Truth. Epistemologies of Disintegration and the Praxeology of Truth, in: Stan Rzeczy / State of Affairs 2(17)/2019, forthcoming.

Kacper Szulecki, *Dissidents in Communist Central Europe: Human Rights and the Emergence of New Transnational Actors*, Basingstoke: Palgrave 2019.