SUMMARY: After the collapse of the communist system in eastern Europe, the development of the historiographies in the Czech and Slovak republics, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Federal Republic of Germany has been characterized by a broad spectrum of differences. This article offers an overview of the ways in which these differences have worked out for the history of the working class in the eastern European countries under communist rule, understood here as the social history of workers. It shows that cultural and political traditions and the “embedding” of historical research in the respective societies prior to 1989, the extent to which historiography after 1989 was able to connect to pre-1989 social-historical or sociological investigations, and the specific national political situation after 1989 make up for much of the differences in the ways that the history of the working class is dealt with in the countries concerned.

Since the collapse of the communist system in eastern Europe, the historiographies of the different countries of the former Soviet bloc have taken different paths.1 Two things appeared initially at least to speak for a common point of departure: the significant change of personnel and the

1. For an overview of the historiographical development in eastern Europe after the fall of communism, see Alojz Ivanišević et al. (eds), Klio ohne Fesseln? Historiographie im östlichen Europa nach dem Zusammenbruch des Kommunismus (Münster, 2004); specifically on the development trends of working-class history, see Bruno Groppo, Quellen und Historiographie der Arbeiterbewegung nach dem Zusammenbruch des “Realsozialismus” (Vienna, 1998).
contraints of the institutional bases of historical research, on the one hand, and the “abolition” of Marxist-Leninist historiography, on the other.\(^2\) However, cultural and political traditions and the “embedding” of historical research in the respective societies prior to 1989 in terms of the manoeuvring room that researchers had created for themselves vis-à-vis state socialism—all of this accounted for a broad spectrum of differences. These differences are also evident in regard to the question of how the historiographies of the Czech and Slovak Republics, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Federal Republic of Germany have contributed after 1989 to working-class history under communist rule.

Working-class history is understood in this article as the social history of workers.\(^3\) Were the developments in historiography in eastern Europe after 1989 able to connect to social-historical or sociological investigations prior to 1989? The answer to this question alone provides a colourful picture.

While it has been pointed out for Romania, for instance, that the sum of “new scholarship on the Romanian working class” is thin “because sociology was banned in the 1980s as a separate discipline”,\(^4\) sociology and social history in Poland and in Hungary were established at a comparatively high level long before 1989. The most recent Polish studies on everyday life in industrial plants during the communist era refer as a matter of course to sociological and social-historical works from the 1960s.\(^5\) Czech and Slovak historians, in contrast, agree that social history, especially the social history of workers prior to 1989, did not produce anything they could draw upon.\(^6\) The situation is also different for the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Although unbiased West German voices affirmed that historical research in the GDR did include productive social-historical approaches prior to 1989,\(^7\) these remained relevant in the appropriation process of East German

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3. Publications on working-class history oriented around the ideology, the programme, and the political organization of workers have not been considered here—for example, the articles in the yearbook published in Budapest up to 2000: *A nemzetközi munkásmozgalom története* [From the History of the International Workers’ Movement].
historiography by West German historiography only to the extent that isolated GDR researchers were exempted from the demonstration of West German “cultural sovereignty”.

The political implications of historical analyses of communist systems are particularly evident in the case of the GDR. After 1989, the assumption of the GDR’s “illegal character” initially unleashed an avalanche of research on the Ministry for State Security (Stasi) and the entire repressive apparatus of the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands [Socialist Unity Party of Germany]) dictatorship, which employed a rigid conception of totalitarianism. Only when a certain disillusionment emerged in the course of such investigations did the emphasis shift slightly in favour of social-historical approaches, which, however, had a bad reputation from the very start as “leftist” trivialization of the


8. Already in the autumn of 1997, the Institute for Social Movements in Bochum held a conference on workers in the GDR, the results of which have more than merely provisional value from a contemporary perspective; see Peter Hübner and Klaus Tenfelde (eds), Arbeiter in der SBZ-DDR (Essen, 1998).
SED state,\(^9\) and which still continue overall to represent a “minority phenomenon”. In the meantime, calm has largely returned to the front between these two research trends, and both conceptions are currently practised in peaceful coexistence.\(^10\)

### THE CZECH AND SLOVAK REPUBLICS

After 1989 working-class history stood at the very bottom of the priority list of Czech and Slovak researchers, and even today its position has improved only marginally. Attempts to approach social history have occurred on different levels. At times studies conceived as general or political history have been “socially enriched”.\(^11\) Frequently spectacular events or ruptures in the development of the communist system have been investigated in terms of social background or social consequences – for instance, the currency reform of 1953.\(^12\) A third variant concentrates on long-term changes in the social macrostructure of the entire society; the guiding issues here are the social and economic consequences of the Sovietization of the country following the communist assumption of power in February 1948.\(^13\) Fourth, a path to social history is also sought through an analysis of social policy and the social system.\(^14\) Closely


\(^10\) One example of the juxtaposition of political-science approaches and social-historical interpretations focusing on the “limits of dictatorship” is Roger Engelmann, Thomas Großböltling, and Hermann Wentker (eds), *Kommunismus in der Krise. Die Entstalinisierung 1956 und die Folgen*. In Auftrag des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte und der Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR (Göttingen, 2008).


related to this are investigations of industrial relations issues and thereby also trade unions.  

Whereas these kinds of works usually touch on the self-conception of social groups only through the question of whether the wage, consumption, and general social policies of the state accorded with the needs of these groups, sociological investigations of the social conditions of the Czechoslovakian population have developed a more differentiated set of methodological tools. Although these studies should by and large be classified as transformation research, they frequently offer significant information about all social groups, including the workforce, for the final decade of the communist era. Investigations focusing exclusively on the social conditions of workers continue to be rare.

The first studies on the cultural-political and political-ideological orchestration of the working class have been published, as have studies on the workplace clubs that were supposed to integrate the recreational activities of industrial workers with a “work culture” tailored to increased production.

Investigations of the repressive structures of the communist system focusing on all social groups are also informative for the issue at hand.


Figure 2. May Day poster of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) in 1946. The Czech text reads: “Work, Strength, Peace for the Republic, Happiness, Well-Being for the People. The Whole Nation with the Communists!”.

These include studies on labour law in the early 1950s, penal practices of the regional courts, and compulsory labour camps. Studies of university history shed light on the inclusion of the working class in higher education, and editions of primary-source texts on the history of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party (KSČ) can also be fruitful for working-class history. The development of KSČ membership has been thoroughly investigated and provides an exact picture of the changing and, after 1948, dramatically shrinking importance of workers within the party.

When workers are the explicit focus of an investigation, entirely different conceptions of working class history are employed, as is illustrated by studies on recalcitrant behaviour, protest, and worker deviance. On the one hand, these studies follow the aforementioned pattern of elucidating the social dimensions of various “great events and major figures”, and thus fit into into the predominant trends in political history. This is true, for instance, for the investigation and documentation of the industrial unrest in Brno 1951, the depiction of the workers’ strike in early June

25. This is true, for example, of the two source volumes: Jitka Vondrová, Jaromír Navrátil, and Jan Moravec (eds), Komunistická strana Československa. Pokus o reformu (říjen 1967–květen 1968) [The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The Attempted Reform (October 1967–May 1968)], (Prague [etc.], 1999); Jitka Vondrová and Jaromír Navrátil (eds), Komunistická strana Československa. Konsolidace (květen–srpen 1968) [The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Consolidation (May–August 1968)] (Prague [etc.], 2000).
1953 immediately after the currency reform, and a study on worker behaviour in 1968. On the other hand, these kinds of events are also taken as an opportunity to analyse from a long-term perspective protest behaviour with regard to the establishment of and the resistance to power claims by the party and state leadership within factories and firms.

This includes approaches to strike research, and studies on the erosion and decline of industrial socialist work initiatives on the basis of counter-strategies by workers in the first two decades after 1948. These investigations broach the question of the real range of power that the communist dictatorship possessed, an issue that is explicitly addressed in analyses of the informal power position of workers in firms as the basis of protest and reproducible opposition.

Massive objections have recently been raised to the rigid conception – predominant in contemporary Czech and Slovak research – of the communist system as an “iron cage of obedience”. This criticism is aimed at a monistic notion of power that refuses to acknowledge the results of social-historical research, which demonstrate the necessity of conceiving power relationally. According to this critique, the dividing line between “regime” and “society” introduced in the Czech totalitarian paradigm is pure mystification because the integration of the population under the Anti-Communist Resistance in Moravia; idem, “Die Verfolgung der Teilnehmer an den Arbeiterdemonstrationen in Brünn im Jahre 1951”, in Brenner and Heumos, Sozialgeschichtliche Kommunismusforschung, pp. 355–364.


33. This according to Michal Pullmann, “Sociální dějiny a totalitníhistorické vyprávění” [Social History and the Totalitarian-Historical Narrative], Soudobé dějiny, 15 (2008), pp. 703–717.
The communist dictatorship was carried out on the basis of pre-political dispositions. One consequence of this empirically dubious dichotomy between “regime” and “society” is the “exoticization” of the communist system.

The accusation of “exoticizing” the era of real socialism can be well demonstrated using precisely the example of working-class history: although research on past epochs has produced studies on working-class history that satisfy the demands of modern social history, a kind of “special methodology” has essentially been claimed for the communist period. This claim stands and falls with the thesis – which has yet to be verified in broad realms – of the communist party’s ubiquitous power over the entire society. This thesis is treated even more dogmatically in Slovak historiography than in Czech historiography – with the results anticipated by the critique that Slovak historians exhibit almost no interest in the communist era.

In the meantime, the erosion of the hardcore version of the totalitarian paradigm has also become evident. This can be seen, for instance, in reviews of relevant publications, which react with surprise that, in this genre, the question of grounding the communist system in the social lifeworld of the population has not been raised at all and that a view “from below” is completely lacking. The “front change” by former protagonists of this genre also suggests an imminent change of course in research on historical communism. This may also be true of the tendency

35. Even the political terror that the Czechoslovakian Communist Party exercised especially in the “founding years” of the people’s democracy (1948–1953) cannot, on closer inspection, be conflated with real power of disposition over the entire society, as is illustrated, by the resistance of industrial workers, which, despite the severity of Stalinist institutions, was particularly developed and, persistent in these years. See Peter Heumos, “Stalinismus in der Tschechoslowakei. Forschungslage und sozialgeschichtliche Anmerkungen am Beispiel der Industriearbeiterschaft”, Journal of Modern European History, 2 (2004), pp. 82–109.
38. Between 1990 and 2008, three studies on the period from 1948 to 1989 were published in the leading Slovak historical journal, Historický časopis.
in the past to tie laurel wreaths to intellectual opposition to communist rule and simultaneously furrow one’s brow at certain forms of worker resistance (absence, go-slow protests, worker morale, etc.).

The crucial issue here, however, is that this dogmatic conception of totalitarianism stands on empirically shaky ground. This is true, for instance, for examinations of the year 1968, whose brilliance lives from a kind of *argumentum e contrario*: the darker the “totalitarian night” of the 1950s, the brighter the Prague Spring shines. The emergence of the autonomous interests of workers in 1968 – at odds with the reform course – with their critique of the party’s “managerial socialism”, as well as everyday life in the province during the Prague Spring, demonstrate that

Figure 3. May Day demonstration in Prague in 1965. In the front row are members of the Czechoslovak Youth Union. Photograph: Private collection of the author.


claims about the departure of the entire Czechoslovakian society to “new shores”, repeatedly emphasized and contrasted to the 1950s, cannot hold up to more rigorous examination.

POLISH REPUBLIC

Traditional social-historical preferences, an open intellectual climate for the real problems of real workers, and the fact that demonstrations by workers repeatedly shook the communist system in Poland to its foundations before Solidarność induced its collapse make Polish historians’ interest in working-class history after 1989 understandable at first glance. In fact the history of political opposition to real socialism in Poland has also been written as working-class history marked by strikes, mass protests, street battles and widespread insurgency movements. The parts of the workforce from which the strikers came have been elucidated for the entire duration of the People’s Republic of Poland. The social structures of the working masses that flowed into Solidarność in the early 1980s have also been well researched. Polish historians do admit that a

50. For a summary of the literature, see Jerzej Chumiński and Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, “Arbeiter und Opposition in Polen 1945–1989”, in Hübner, Kleßmann, and Tenfelde, Arbeiter im Staatssocialismus, pp. 425–451; on Solidarność, see especially Roman Laba, The Roots of

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certain “heroization” of the working class cannot always be avoided,51 but they have attempted to work against this in various ways.

For Polish historians, it remains an open question whether the frequent worker unrest in Poland was pivotal to the changes in the political system. Did this unrest aim at a different form of the distribution of goods or at changing the principles of the political order? After 1989 – in the transition to the market economy and to democracy – this question spurred a debate, in which many participants judged the democratic potential of the working class sceptically.52 The fact that workers here have been ascribed little affinity to pluralist values also connects to sociological research prior to 1989.53

That the less flattering modes of worker behaviour have also been investigated suggests this is a realistic perception of the workforce. This includes, for example, the role of a significant portion of the working class in the March events of 1968, when workers allowed themselves to be drawn into the anti-Semitic smear campaign incited by the Polish United Workers’ Party.55

Methodologically, Polish historians have avoided the socio-political “particularizing” of the working class through the concept of “social


55. For a summary of this, see Andrea Genest, “Zwischen Anteilnahme und Ablehnung – die Rolle der Arbeiter in den Märzereignissen 1968 in Polen”, in Gehrke and Horn, 1968 und die Arbeiter, pp. 185–209.
resistance”, a move that has also been supported institutionally by the activities of the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (Institut for National Thought) and the KARTA Centre. This concept re-enacts the approach of “social self-organization”, through which the democratic opposition in Poland began in the mid-1970s to address society itself rather than the state as its primary interlocutor. These ideas gave rise in 1976 to the Komitet Obrony Robotników (Committee for the Defence of Workers), whose significance as “a civic movement of moral resistance” lay in the fact that extremely diverse social groups accepted its programme and that it enabled a rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the opposition. This concrete socio-political generalization of dissent, protest, and resistance, which the mass movement Solidarność was able to utilize at the beginning of the 1980s, also made possible numerous publications that closely tied working-class history and social history – whether from the standpoint of the working class’s relations to the changing power elites, the position of workers during critical upheavals, or workers’ state of consciousness in relation to other social groups.

Evidently this is one way to get away from the figures of thought in Cold War literature, in which every form of protest in real socialism was elevated to fundamental opposition to the communist system. Especially sociological investigations have worked against this kind of interpretation by demonstrating under which socio-structural conditions actions representative of broad strata were possible under communist rule.


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Approaches to comparative protest research for eastern central Europe also affirm methodological efforts to socially "fortify" the notion of resistance.64

This concept shifts attention to group-specific distinctions and simultaneously to the question of adaptation to existing circumstances,65 an issue that investigations of workplace history have also pushed into the foreground: focusing on the control of firms by the party and by labour unions and on the activities of security forces helps to illuminate adaptations made in everyday life.

Investigations of workplace history with a primary interest in the everyday life of workers66 – including examinations of the subcultural milieu, especially of young workers in model socialist cities such as Nowa Huta67 – attained a level early on68 that suggested comparisons with other socialist countries.69

64. On this, see Łukasz Kamiński (ed.), *Z badań nad oporem społecznym w Europie Środkowej w latach 1948–1955* [From Research on Social Resistance in Central Europe between 1948 and 1955] (Warsaw, 2000); Krzysztof Ruchniewicz (ed.), *Powstanie czerwcowe w NDR w 1953 roku na tle innych wystąpień antykomunistycznych w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* [The June Uprising in the GDR in 1953 before the Background of other Anti-Communist Uprisings in the Countries of Central Europe] (Wrocław, 2003).


Drawing upon research on working-class milieu and traditions in Poland, investigations have also depicted the forms of surveillance of these milieus. Studies on the control of firms and factories through workplace committees of the party and trade unions also exist. Numerous investigations have examined the oppositional strategies of workers that aimed at avoiding surveillance and disciplinary action. Work by women in industrial plants has also been analysed within the scope of research on women’s occupational labour. Whereas prior to 1989 worker discipline and productivity were usually treated critically, the work ethos now receives its due, without neglecting the phenomenon of “amoral familiarism,” that is, those corrupt and illegal practices in everyday life (not only that of workers), which reflect the fact that moral and legal criteria lose their validity outside of “local” environs. Finally, studies on the lifestyles of workers are also part of the broad spectrum of issues concerning working-class history.

75. See Mazurek, “Das Alltagsleben”, p. 303.
Although conceptual precautions have, as we have seen, been taken to prevent working-class history from drifting off to a special status, there continue to be critical voices as well: advocates of the ethos of martyrdom and resistance inherited from the resistance of World War II still favour both oppositional actions and spectacular revolts and conceal conformist attitudes by workers. They do not regard references to the unresponsiveness of workers to communist ideology, and to the extensive failure of totalitarianism in Poland as helpful. Instead they argue, supported by grassroots sources, that workers thoroughly internalized the communist promise of a “better life”, but that they continued to experience “relative discrimination” under communist rule. The growing discrepancy between expectations and reality, they insist, has been crucial in workers repeatedly taking their affairs into their own hands.

HUNGARIAN REPUBLIC

A central focus of working-class history in Hungary after 1989 has undoubtedly been the Stalinist period from 1948–1956. One indication of a systematic interest in this phase is that primary-source editions on working-class history under communist rule began with this period. For the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in Budapest, the years 1948–1956, as the prehistory of the popular uprising in the fall of 1956, stand at the centre of its research interests, although these are oriented around political history. The most important publications of the institute include the documentation of the Revolution of 1956.
Outside the institute, the history of the workers’ councils in the uprising of 1956 was quickly updated after 1989. 86

Research on Stalinism, however, has not been conceived in such a way that the uprising of 1956 serves as its vanishing point. Studies on social change in Hungary during the second half of the twentieth century disqualify the assumption that a surfeit of social problems existed in the revolutionary year of 1956. 87 Investigations of Hungary’s cultural development in the second half of the twentieth century that include the cultural situation of workers do not point to any profound ruptures in 1956. 88 In addition, studies assessing the human and social costs that Stalinist industrialization demanded of Hungarian workers have resisted the temptation of depicting worker’s reactions to terror, violence, and impoverishment as a cumulative process that reached its climax in 1956. 89 These studies are driven to large degree by reflections on how working-class history can be combined with anthropological research, 90 and they are more interested in the diversity of the social causes of worker protest than in the conditions under which such protest was manifested politically. 91 Research on the working-class milieu – the milieu of the “new working class” that the party attempted to recruit from its own supporters is also considered here 92 – suggest that the social “penetration depth” of


the peripetia of political developments was minor. Connecting to older studies of local history, scholars have outlined the working-class milieu for a particular city district or city. Examples of this are investigations of the Budapest working-class district of Újpest and of everyday life in the model socialist city of Sztálinváros.

Studies on the history of trade unions have also concentrated on the terrorist phase of the party dictatorship (1948–1956), and have shown that the founding of communist trade unions was carried out over the heads of a disempowered workforce, which under the Horthy dictatorship and Nazi occupation had lost its connection to trade unions committed solely to the ideology and practices of social peace. Historians regard this stripping of workers’ organizational ties in society along with the ensuing social and moral consequences as an essential preliminary stage, if not the most important precondition, for the far-reaching adaptation of workers to the authoritarian-repressive structures of the early phase of the socialist transformation.

This is the point of departure for a series of investigations with two explicit objectives. First, they demonstrate that socialist industrialization (which might have been especially rigid in Hungary) evoked a countermovement by workers in factories, through which they were able to mitigate the dictate of ever increasing planning goals by means of informal agreements with workplace and local power elites, and thereby harmonized these goals with their own traditional “production culture”. Second, this informal power position of workers has served as the starting point for the social history of a “production regime” generated “from below”, which is distinguished from standard portrayals of the history of economics and planning under state socialism as the history of its institutional framework.

In addition to a brief outline of this research programme, which emphasizes the limits of state control over the production process, this approach has also been applied to two different complexes during the early phase of the socialist transformation: the attempts by workers to informally regulate work-time and wages; and the bargaining strategies of the skilled workers who sought to maintain or reintroduce within the workforce hierarchies tied to traditional working-class culture, in which a generational conflict between older and younger skilled labourers was also evident. This approach has proved equally productive when applied to the economic reforms under Kádár in 1968, which did contribute to some degree to the political pacification of the workforce, but were also eroded over the long-term through the informal “production regime”. The report by a “key worker” at the Red Star tractor factory in Budapest suggests that the concept outlined above of the informal adaptation of the planning system to social relations at the workplace does in fact do justice to Hungarian reality.

Like their Polish counterparts, Hungarian researchers have also examined the contemporary question of how four decades of communist rule effected the workforce, in other words: how the resource “labour” available for the Hungarian path to capitalism was procured. This includes analyses of the labor market and investigations of worker behaviour in the changing social and workplace constellations.

In addition to the emphasis on the Stalinist dictatorship, long-term investigations of the social situation of the workforce after 1956 also point

104. This report is used in Michael Burawoy and János Lukács, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism* (Chicago, IL [etc.], 1992).
to the emergence of a second focus in Hungarian research on communism. As in Poland, these investigations presuppose, on the one hand, a conflict between ideological representations of the working class and the real experiences of workers under communist rule; at the same time, these investigations also elucidate how the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party dealt with this contradiction, which it found worrisome at times. On the other hand, changes in “working-class life” in Hungary have also been analysed from a long-term perspective, a research orientation strongly influenced by the aforementioned anthropological interest and that connects the issue of “working-class life” beyond material indicators of living standards to psychic-mental structures, ties to traditional values, private and public modes of social behaviour, and cultural orientations. Related to this are also studies on the self-conception of female factory workers.

**REPUBLIC OF ROMANIA**

“New scholarship on the Romanian working class is almost non-existent”, someone who ought to know wrote in the spring of 2009. The only thing that should be added here is that the methodological-conceptual approach to Romanian working-class history in realsocialism is more research-intensive in many respects than, for instance, in Poland or Hungary; nevertheless, the few existing investigations of working-class history here are promising.

As a major social group, the Romanian workforce is a product of the country’s socialist industrialization. Around 1930 industrial workers comprised approximately 8 per cent of the entire population. For this reason, an interpretive model that is widely used for obvious reasons by Czech, Polish, and Hungarian scholars cannot be applied to the history of the Romanian working class: the examination of the strategies used in conflicts between working-class traditions and the demands of the new reality under the communist dictatorship. The history of Romania’s social democracy rewritten after 1989 makes clear that Romanian workers had no recourse to political traditions; while the study does allude to connections between the party and the workforce, it cannot get around the fact that the social basis of

Romanian social democracy during the interbellum period was shaped above all by low-level white-collar employees. In fact only after World War II was there a larger influx of workers into the party as a result of the collapse of the old party system.

For this reason, far more than elsewhere, Romanian workers were confronted with the necessity of learning processes. The fact that between 1950 and 1989 there were only thirty-six known cases of worker strikes, demonstrations, and revolts in Romania — limited almost every time to a single factory — should thus be attributed not only to the (undisputed) brutality of the Ceaușescu regime. Even where workers could draw upon a long tradition of collective action — for example, in Czechoslovakia — it still took some time before they were able to identify which means should be used in confronting the state and the party in order to attain their demands. Comparisons with other countries could in fact help avoid rashly labelling Romania a “special case”.

The self-perception of Romanian workers does not seem to have deviated significantly from the characteristics observed everywhere in real socialism. Similarities to other countries are evident in conflict behaviour, for miners, for instance, who in both Romania and Czechoslovakia retained paternalistic patterns of interaction in the sense that in conflicts they insisted on face-to-face communication with the most senior political representatives and rejected subordinate officials as negotiating partners. Furthermore, even with the limited strike sample for Romania, a long-term change is evident: between the two major strikes that took place in socialist Romania — the miners’ strike in the Jiu Valley in August 1977 and the Brașov revolt at the Steagul Roșu tractor factory in November 1987 — a transition occurred from social demands to political protest against the communist system and explicitly against Ceaușescu.

115. On this, see the contributions cited in n. 30.
118. Ibid., pp. 330–336; for details on the strike in the Jiu Valley, which began in the Lupeni mine, see Mihai Barbu and Gheorghe Chirvasă, După 20 de ani: Lupeni ’77–Lupeni ’97 [Twenty Years Later: Lupeni 1977–Lupeni 1997] (Petroșani, 1997); eyewitness reports of the
Romanian researchers have focused on the phenomenon of the peasant-worker, which Romania shared with Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, although the numerical size of this group varied in the different countries. A quick glance at the changing social behaviour of this group from country to country indicates that this part of the workforce, which oscillated between factory work and sideline agricultural labour, deserves closer investigation.\textsuperscript{119} For Czechoslovakia – where in the mid-1950s peasant-workers comprised around one-third of all working class households – scholars have argued that the kovorolnici (iron peasants) represented a kind of “rest mass” of the industrial workforce on the basis of their social distance to the industrial milieu;\textsuperscript{120} in Romania, in contrast, where peasant workers made up 30 to 50 per cent of the workforce, they evidently constituted a ferment of protest and unrest. When the protest broke out in Timișoara on 16 December 1989, which led to the collapse of the Ceaușescu regime a few days later, Moldavian peasant-workers stood in the front lines of the rebelling crowd.\textsuperscript{121}

The investigation of working-class history in Romania between 1948 and 1989 has drawn productively in several ways from transformation research.\textsuperscript{122} This history will gain clearer contours when it can be evaluated before the background of more precise knowledge about other social groups.\textsuperscript{123} The analysis of these groups has been overshadowed for the time being by the focus on the terror, control, and repressive apparatuses of the party dictatorship.\textsuperscript{124} This has sparked a debate about the character of the Ceaușescu era, in which the focus has shifted more to issues of the regime’s social resonance than its repressive apparatuses.\textsuperscript{125}

worker revolt in Brașov are published in Romulus Rusan (ed.), O zi de toamnă, cîndva ... 15 noiembrie 1987, Brașov [A Day in Autumn, some time ... November 15, 1987, in Brașov] (Bucarest, 2004).
\textsuperscript{119} On the basis of the findings at the international colloquium “Workers in State Socialism” at the Centre for Contemporary Historical Research in Potsdam, Germany in September 2003, it was agreed to establish a study group devoted specially to peasant-workers in real socialism.
\textsuperscript{121} Petrescu, “Workers and Peasant-Workers”, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{123} A desideratum emphasized by Romanian historians; on this see, for instance, Petrescu and Petrescu, “Resistance and Dissent”.
\textsuperscript{124} For the period prior to Ceaușescu, see Dennis Deletant, \textit{Terror Communist in Romania: Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State, 1948–1965} (New York, 1999); for the entire communist era, see Corina Marculesa, “Captive Romania: Police Terror and Ideological Masquerade under Communist Rule”, \textit{East European Quarterly}, 41 (2008), pp. 383–406.
\textsuperscript{125} This is the context of the thesis, supported by several authors, that although no serious attempt was made to “de-Stalinize” under Ceaușescu, the regime did as a whole place more
REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

According to a study from 2005, the issue of “workers in state socialism” has “not yet been discovered” as a subject of contemporary historical research in post-1989 Bulgaria.\(^{126}\) Scholars have, however, begun to approach the issue from several directions. Social-historical studies focusing on the time period from the 1960s to the mid-1990s and incorporating the most important social development trends even outside Bulgaria have described the workforce as an essentially stabilizing element of Bulgarian state socialism.\(^{127}\) In doing so, they can point to the fact that no noteworthy strikes or other form of worker protest were documented in Bulgaria after 1956 until the collapse of real socialism in the country in 1989.\(^{128}\)

According to political-historical accounts, the Bulgarian Communist Party could especially count on workers when the wage system produced egalitarian structures and the economic system maintained orthodox notions of order. Formulated slightly differently, workers stigmatized as socially unjust and – in agreement with intra-party oppositional and leftist dissident groups – as a “betrayal of socialism” distinctions in performance and wages as well as the transition to a decentralized and liberalized economic order, as occurred within the scope of economic reforms in the 1960s.\(^{129}\) Transformation research, which analyses Bulgaria’s transition to capitalism, has proved fruitful for information about the development of workers’ standards of living since the 1960s.\(^{130}\) The reconstruction of trade-union history\(^{131}\) has also proceeded rapidly because in the 1980s the research institute of the Bulgarian trade-union federation conducted a series of nationwide sociological investigations into the situation of workers, which have provided important insights into their everyday life.\(^{132}\)

Another group of investigations influenced by ethnology and cultural history has focused on Bulgarian society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These investigations are organized primarily around the issue of emphasis on “cooptation” than terror. See Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley, CA, 2003).


\(^{131}\) Aleksander Petkov (ed.), *Bulgarskoto sindikalno deženje – minalo i nastojanshte* [The Trade-Union Movement in Bulgaria – Past and Present] (Sofia, 2000).

\(^{132}\) On this, see the study cited in n. 134.
the “lifeworld”, and from this perspective they contribute significantly to our knowledge of the modes of living and the self-conception of Bulgarian workers under state socialism. Noteworthy in this context are articles about Bulgarian workers’ perceptions of their own living conditions (on the basis of surveys conducted by the aforementioned trade-union research institute), about the social situation in youth construction brigades, about mental and subcultural structures of everyday work life, and about workplace networks and clientelism, a subject that has also been investigated in detail for Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Like Romania, the Bulgarian example also suggests the desirability of a comparative investigation of the “peasant-worker” problematic. In the 1960s, around 40 per cent of the Bulgarian workforce was recruited from people living in rural conditions. Research by Bulgarian ethnologists has shown that the mass of peasant-workers largely retained their peasant lifestyle and that they were the actual social carriers of egalitarian ideas with regard to wage policy. Research in other countries has presumed, in contrast, that the preference for an egalitarian wage policy is more typical of unskilled labourers, the group usually favoured by communist parties, which cannot be conflated with peasant-workers.

**FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY**

In investigating the history of the GDR, researchers addressed a broad array of social-historical issues early on. It may appear problematic to

135. Radost Ivanova, ‘‘Stroim za narodnata republika’. Mladežki stroitelni brigadi – škola za komunističesko vázpitanie” [“We’re Building for the People’s Republic”. The Youth Construction Brigades – A School of Communist Education], in Radost Ivanova et al. (eds), *Socializm – realnost i iljuzii. Etnologični aspekti na vsekidnevnata kultura* [Socialism – Reality and Illusions. Ethnological Aspects of Everyday Culture] (Sofia, 2003), pp. 54–62.
139. On this, see the studies cited in n. 31.
140. Five years after the collapse of the GDR, the first larger review of social-historical research on the GDR indicated the breadth of issues that had been examined here. See Hartmut Kaebble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (eds), *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, (Stuttgart, 1994).
separate working-class history from these investigations, especially since the most fruitful social-historical research strategies focus methodologically and conceptually on overarching social developments. On the other hand, the “workplace” as a system has assumed a central position in those studies that, in examining the causes of the GDR’s collapse, have concentrated on the tendency to informal “socialization of the state”. Investigations of everyday workplace life in the GDR indicate that places of work were embedded in a network of secondary power and exchange relations beneath the level of formal planning decisions and thus can be understood as the “sediment” from the informal erosion of state structures.

After the information veil surrounding the GDR was lifted with German reunification, concepts were developed to compare working-class history in the GDR with that in the Federal Republic, especially with regard to traditions of working-class milieu. In addition to the possibility of using now accessible archival sources, studies of oral history also focused on East German working-class milieu. The question of continuities and ruptures in the social development of the GDR – which is part of the search for the causes of the collapse of the second German state – has proved productive in discussions of working-class milieu.


Scholars of workplace history have also benefited from the altered archival situation, as they can now examine how the GDR dealt with the industrial heritage of the Third Reich and how this heritage effected workers’ modes of behaviour.147

This new beginning, however, was characterized above all by a fundamental critique of “older” working class historiography and its emphasis on the “market situation” of workers and the resulting socio-structural implications, the living conditions, and the milieu of workers.148 More recent historiography has emphasized, in contrast, a “micro-political” approach, that is, the role of workers as workplace actors who possess manoeuvring room in a complex production and social milieu beyond the formal order of the workplace; it has also emphasized, within the scope of the “turn to cultural history”, the significance of ties beyond the “class model”, for example, the significance of gender, generation, and ethnic affiliation.149 These debates have resulted in publications on working-class history of the GDR that expand the analytic frame of working-class history. One such publication is the anthology on the central German chemical industry and its workers in the twentieth century.150

Behind these debates are diametrically opposed positions, which necessarily emerged in the course of analysing the working-class history of the GDR on the basis of concepts, questions, and interpretive patterns drawn from West German industrial society. It is difficult, the one side has argued, to transfer concepts such as “class”, “stratum”, and “social protest” from market-oriented, competitive societies to the state socialist, planned-economic society of the GDR.151 The other side counters, on the basis, for instance, of the ostdeutschen Arbeitermilieus”, in Michael Vester, Michael Hofman, and Irene Zierke (eds), Soziale Milieus in Ostdeutschland. Gesellschaftliche Strukturen zwischen Zerfall und Neubildung (Cologne, 1995), pp. 91–135; idem, “Die Leipziger Metallarbeiter. Etappen sozialer Erfahrungsgeschichte. Milieubiographie eines Arbeitermilieus in Leipzig”, in ibid., pp. 136–192; Helmut W. Smith, “The Demography of Discontinuity in Bitterfeld, 1930–1953”, in Peter Hübner and Klaus Tenfelde (eds), Arbeiter in der SBZ/DDR (Essen, 1999), pp. 811–822.


149. Representative of this research concept is Karl Lauschke and Thomas Welskopp (eds), Mikropolitik im Unternehmen. Arbeitsbeziehungen und Machtsstrukturen in industriellen Großbetrieben des 20. Jahrhunderts (Essen, 1994).


151. Dietmar Süß, “Arbeitergeschichte und Organisationssoziologie: Perspektiven einer Annäherung”, in ibid., pp. 76–89; on this, see also Christoph Kleßmann, “Die ‘verstaatlichte Arbeiterbewegung’. Überlegungen zur Sozialgeschichte der Arbeiterchaft in der DDR”, in
category of “social protest”, with the call to level radically distinctions between “capitalism” and “socialism” in favour of overarching historical research on protest and crowd history.\(^\text{152}\) Initial studies using this latter conception of social protests have already been published.\(^\text{153}\)

The example of the worker uprising of 17 June 1953, however, makes clear that using the concepts of a capitalist-critical crowd history to interpret central and politically charged protests cannot hope for broader resonance at this time. Studies of the uprising of 17 June 1953 have been constructed primarily as a history of political events; without empirical comparison to other revolts, they cannot do justice to the claim that this uprising was part of the series of major revolts in German and European history – as was evident everywhere, for example, on the fiftieth anniversary of the uprising.\(^\text{154}\)


\(^\text{152}\) On this see the article by Lindenberger cited in n. 9.


Incidentally, researchers of the conflict behaviour of workers in the GDR have been unimpressed by the burdens of political tribute with regard to 17 June. Their central argument here has been that workers did not regard massive confrontations with the party and state apparatus as advisable after 1953. The SED’s strategy of social pacification, encircling firms and factories with the Stasi apparatus over the course of the 1960s, the activities of the conflict commissions formed in 1953, and the tacit truce between state and workforce on the issues of wages and norms ultimately resulted in the state itself setting the rules for workplace conflict behaviour after the traumatic experience of 1953.\(^{155}\) Research on the group and conflict behaviour of women,\(^ {156}\) and long-term studies of the mental structures and the social modes of behaviour of the industrial


workforce\textsuperscript{157} (in addition to milieu studies), as well as studies on the self-conception of workers from a generational-historical perspective\textsuperscript{158} have supplemented and differentiated this model.

Research on industrial work behaviour\textsuperscript{159} and work organization\textsuperscript{160} have illuminated primarily the areas of friction between the planning system and the “production culture” of workers based on life-world value orientations. These investigations are less informative about manifest conflicts than about the structural abrasion of the SED’s industrial policies. In addition to the role of plant management in work conflicts,\textsuperscript{161} conflict (and cooperation) between the SED factory groups and workplace personnel have also been investigated for the Soviet occupation zone,\textsuperscript{162} three major industrial firms from 1959 to 1965,\textsuperscript{163} and the state


\textsuperscript{163} Christoph Vietzke, \textit{Konfrontation und Kooperation. Funktionäre und Arbeiter in Großbetrieben der DDR vor und nach dem Mauerbau} (Essen, 2008).
of Brandenburg from 1945 to 1952.\textsuperscript{164} Two publications stand out on research about trade-union and worker relations, one that focuses on the “founding years” of GDR trade unions,\textsuperscript{165} the other on the activities of union workplace representatives from the Free German Trade Union Federation (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund).\textsuperscript{166} Using a broad base of sources, the cultural work of trade unions at the workplace\textsuperscript{167} has also been analysed as one dimension of the research field “workforce and culture”.\textsuperscript{168}

Social-historical and social-political longitudinal studies addressing comprehensive issues have been helpful in better localizing the workforce within GDR society.\textsuperscript{169} An introduction to the most recent research on the subject

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{164} Friederike Sattler, \textit{Wirtschaftsordnung im Übergang: Politik, Organisation und Funktion der KPD/SED im Land Brandenburg bei der Etablierung der zentralen Planwirtschaft der SBZ/DDR 1945–1952}, 2 vols (Münster [etc.], 2002).
  \item \textsuperscript{165} Helke Stadtland, \textit{Herrschaft nach Plan und Macht der Gewohnheit. Sozialgeschichte der Gewerkschaften in der SBZ/DDR 1945–1953} (Essen, 2001).
  \item \textsuperscript{166} Renate Hürtgen, \textit{Zwischen Disziplinierung und Partizipation. Vertrauensleute des FDGB im DDR-Betrieb} (Cologne [etc.], 2005).


\end{itemize}
is provided by an investigation that ties together the broad spectrum of approaches to working-class history in the GDR according to central issues. Finally, there have also been studies that take relations in the GDR as a starting point and outline a comparative working-class history in eastern Europe – in full awareness of the variations in current research within the different countries. These studies either concentrate on variants of working-class milieu and investigate how the imperatives of the state-socialist system were appropriated within these milieus, or they delineate different paths of state-socialist development tied to the long-term social development trends of the workforce and of society overall. The two approaches elucidate “types of decline” for state socialism, each of which tells us something about the forms of transition to post-communist relations.

SUMMARIZING COMMENTS

Investigating “workers in state socialism” may appear today merely to be retrospection on an obsolete social formation from the history of the twentieth century, “without recognizable contemporary relevance”. This all the more so when the industrial working class as a type, in the traditional configuration that constituted the basis for communist parties in both ideological and practical-political terms, is a historically outdated phenomenon. There is thus a certain consistency in the fact that in discussions about the causes of the collapse of state socialism – insofar as these address the role of workers – the predominant view is that the workforce produced no structural elements that could be used after the collapse of real socialism for the transformation to a market society.

For instance, the concept of communist neo-traditionalism, which focuses on the networks, patron–client relations, and personally and instrumentally based subsystems in state socialist societies, moves these informal relations into the proximity of corruption and criminality, and thereby characterizes the informal power positions of workers in factories.

173. This is the argument of the editor in the introduction to Hübner, Kleßmann, and Tenfelde, *Arbeiter im Staatssozialismus*.
and firms in all state socialist countries as a structural attribute incapable of contributing in any productive way to the establishment of a modern social order. Other authors, in contrast, see these networks as a modern socialization form and an important resource in the transition to market society.\textsuperscript{176} It is likely, however, that modernization theory will discover in the state socialist workforce few, if any, structural elements that could be used for the transformation to a market-based order.\textsuperscript{177} This evaluation appears all the more plausible in light of observations here and there of the retreat of the workforce to its old “strongholds”, for example, in the Soviet Union – comparative studies for the countries of eastern-central and south-eastern Europe are lacking – where, after the establishment of the market, the workforce began to seal itself off in its traditional social-moral and socio-cultural values and workplace communicative networks.\textsuperscript{178}

If we take up the recommendation made most recently in the debate about new conceptualizations of working-class history and advocate (re-)writing the history of the working class from the perspective of its contributions to civil society,\textsuperscript{179} a different picture emerges, one that offers less occasion for scepticism. Two arguments are immediately evident. First, resistance, dissent, demonstrations, and revolts by workers – not only in Poland, but also in other countries – have consciously sought out the public sphere, thereby strengthening the autonomous public spheres that crystallized around non-state opinion-forming associations (civil initiatives, cultural associations, debate clubs, etc.).\textsuperscript{180} Second, the massive resistance of workers to socialist labour initiatives (peak load and Stakhanov work, socialist competition) had less to do with the refusal to work than with a rebellion against the work-world impinging on the life-world. In order to increase production, teachers were instructed to call upon pupils to encourage their fathers to greater dedication in socialist competitions.\textsuperscript{181}

\textsuperscript{176} On this, see the contribution cited in n. 141.
\textsuperscript{177} On this in the GDR, see Ulrich Voskamp and Volker Wittke, ““Fordismus in einem Land” – Das Produktionsmodell der DDR”, \textit{Sozialwissenschaftliche Informationen}, 19 (1990), pp. 170–180.
\textsuperscript{180} While research on strikes in state socialist countries has primarily emphasized the elementary character of the strike and understood them as simple reflexes to economic stimuli, much evidence can be found on closer inspection that, for instance, the time of the labour disputes was consciously chosen with a view to the greatest possible public sphere. An illustrative example of this is the strike in the Prague coal depots in the summer of 1955, which strike organizers allowed to take place only after the Spartakiad had begun in the state capital. See Heumos, “Zum industriellen Konflikt”, p. 489.
It is an irony of history that this separation of life-world and work-world has today once again become topical. While scholars of communism begin to agree that one of the most important reasons for the collapse of state socialism was inadequate functional differentiation (and this includes the differentiation of work-world and life-world in the sense of productive and reproductive spheres), behind their backs post-Fordism abolishes this same differentiation. In the production model of global turbo-capitalism, the dissolution of the boundaries between the work-world and the life-world is continued, with the life-world increasingly being claimed as a resource for the work-world. Theorists of civil society discuss this development as the “colonizing encroachments of system imperatives on areas of the lifeworld”.

183. From the wealth of literature on this issue I mention here only Birgit Huber, “Entgrenzung von Arbeit und Leben im Postfordismus und (Post-)Sozialismus. Subjektivierung als Ansatz für vergleichende Forschung”, in Roth, Arbeitswelt – Lebenswelt, pp. 121–140.