

# [Global Histories]

## A student journal

**Review: Constructing ‘the Soviet’? Political Consciousness, Everyday Practices, New Identities – Conference at the European University at St. Petersburg, April 2018**

Author: Daria Tashkinova

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.203>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 1 (May 2018), pp. 211–213

ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2018 Daria Tashkinova



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

---

Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin

Global Histories: A Student Journal

Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut

Koserstraße 20

14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website [www.globalhistories.com](http://www.globalhistories.com) or contact the editor at: [admin@globalhistories.com](mailto:admin@globalhistories.com).

---

# Constructing ‘the Soviet’? Political Consciousness, Everyday Practices, New Identities

## European University at St. Petersburg, April 2018

---

### REVIEWED BY DARIA TASHKINOVA

*Daria Tashkinova completed her undergraduate degree in Area Studies at Ural Federal University (Russia) in 2014, focusing on the history and politics of Eastern and Central Europe. The same year she started an M.A. in Global History at both Freie Universität and Humboldt Universität of Berlin. Her research interests include social and labour history of the late Soviet Union; transnational migrations; history of imperialism; gender and education history. She is currently writing her Master’s Thesis about the job assignment system in the USSR.*

The 12<sup>th</sup> annual conference “Constructing ‘the Soviet’? Political Consciousness, Everyday Practices, New Identities” took place at the European University in St. Petersburg on the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2018. The conference, organised by several students of the European University, gave a chance to undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate scholars to present their research on notions of the ‘Soviet.’ This year’s seven panels discussed the visual narratives of socialism; the artistic discourse in the USSR; the multiplicity of Soviet identity; science and scholarship in the Soviet Union; ideology and practices of labour; transformations of regime and ideology; and lastly childhood and upbringing under Soviet socialism. By drawing upon a wide array of actors, themes, sources, and approaches, the conference presented an interesting overview of current academic trends in research on the Soviet experience. The programme was not specific to one particular time frame: one could find presentations ranging from the early 1920s all the way to the last days of the Soviet Union and, in some cases, even beyond that into the period of post-communist Russia.

The conference was held in an unusual format I have not encountered before in my relatively modest academic career. After each presentation by the two to four participants in each panel, the chair and the audience asked them questions related to the theme of their research. This was followed by comments from either one of the professors at the European University, or a guest lecturer. The structure gave all of the panelists some time to discuss their presentations, as well as answering questions related to it. Therefore, nobody felt excluded or ignored as it can sometimes be the case in conferences with longer rounds of discussion. However, the following commentary by senior researchers and professors, though intended to be helpful, unfortunately created an uncomfortable ‘classroom’ atmosphere. Rather than providing constructive feedback and suggestions or uniting the papers of the panel into a single narrative, some professors criticized the presentations from a hierarchical position that made me personally feel a little uneasy. The professors’

presence during the post-presentation discussions sometimes led to a wave of harsh critique and pinpointing of individual mistakes. Although I do realize that students need guidance, advice and criticism from senior researchers to improve their work, in my personal opinion, a student conference is hardly the place for this sort of remarks. I do believe that student conferences are first and foremost places to share research interests, exchange ideas, and build networks among fellow students. The uneven nature of relationships between professors and students stripped the conference of a welcoming atmosphere. Instead it unfortunately felt more like presenting at a university seminar rather than at a conference of peers.

Two talks by guest lecturers closed both days of the conference. At the end of the first day, Birte Kohtz, a researcher at the German Historical Institute in Moscow, presented the early stages of her new research on the history of the unborn in the Soviet Union. She focuses on the medical perceptions of pregnancy and the fetus in the 1970s and 1980s. In light of the ongoing debate on abortion laws in the US, Ireland, Poland, and Russia this research is a timely and important matter, especially considering how supposedly ‘progressive’ the Soviet stance on reproductive rights was. On the second day, the closing lecture was given by Alexander Reznik, a European University graduate and researcher at the Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg. In his speech, he attempted to deconstruct the ‘cult’ of Leon Trotsky. Reznik argued that Trotsky’s was a case of a hybrid cult that was supposedly first created without Trotsky’s consent and contrary to his will. Later, he argued that the ‘anti-cult’ surrounding Trotsky, having been created by monarchists during the Russian Civil War, was picked up by Stalinist propaganda after Trotsky’s ouster.

Since the conference was held in two official languages, Russian and English, it allowed several international researchers, including myself, to participate and present their works in English. Moreover, some comments and the lecture by Birte Kohtz were also given in English. Despite my criticism on the format of the after-panel comments, I was incredibly honoured to be a part of the panel on Soviet labour practices which was commented upon by Alexandra Oberländer, a professor at the University of Bremen and a renowned specialist on the labour history of the late Soviet Union. Her comments, as well as remarks by fellow panelists gave me valuable recommendations and suggestions on how to improve my work.

The conference gave an interesting inside into the state of history as a discipline in modern Russia. During the course of the conference and especially while listening to the harsh comments given to some panelists, I was desperately trying to understand a certain discomfort I had about this conference’s approach. Being a student in the Global History Master’s program at the Freie Universität Berlin and therefore inside a ‘Western’ and ‘Global’ atmosphere of constant search for connections in the wider picture of historical events, it is very easy to forget about more regionalised ways of writing history. However, despite presenting some very exciting sources, more often than not, presenters in St. Petersburg limited them-

selves to describing their sources. I could not help wanting to hear more about what the panelists actually wanted to argue by using their sources. Unfortunately, the feeling persisted. Setting my experience at this conference and the differences between Western and Russian approaches to writing history in perspective, I noticed that the former teaches its students to focus on the discussion and their place in it. We spend more time debating with other scholars, while using sources to defend their or our own arguments. The Russian tradition, however, is more source-centred. In other words, scholars within this tradition create great examples of meticulous source analysis and description, which are incredibly valuable. But as someone who has been writing in the Western 'style' for the last four years, I was constantly frustrated by the lack of an argument and just kept wondering how much argumentative potential some of the presentations had, but never showed.

Despite certain points of criticism I have expressed above, participating in this conference was an important experience to me personally and to other participants. With the support of the European University and the German Historical Institute in Moscow, the conference provides a stage for young researchers who get the chance to present their work in one of the most respected institutions in Russia. The conference provides accommodation in St. Petersburg and financial support for those traveling from afar, making it easier for students to attend. Moreover, every year the conference organizers publish a volume with all the presentations. Thereby they give participants a chance to have publications under their names in the early stages of their careers.

The troubling political situation in which the European University has found itself for the last two years makes it impossible to predict if "Constructing 'the Soviet?'" is going to take place next year. By organizing this conference in spite of the shadow looming over the university's future, the students have shown true academic spirit. Personally, it was a great pleasure to participate.