

Towards an Understanding of the Party Historiography in the 1950s and 1960s



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At the turn of the forties and fifties, party historiography became a new discipline within the Czechoslovak historiography, conceived as a historiographic project aiming to chronicle the history of the Communist Party and the Labour Movement. It was to be a part of original historical science with its own theoretical and methodological apparatus. The primary task of the party historiography was the creation of new historical stories that were to legitimise in the eyes of the general public the project of extensive political and social reconstruction, which was an essential part of the building of real socialism in Czechoslovakia. Newly formed interpretative patterns were to result in a clean break with already established local interpretations of the history of bourgeois historiography and serve the ideological indoctrination of Czechoslovak society. Unity between the party historiography and the realm of politics was taken for granted. One of the prerequisites for carrying out these tasks was anchoring the discipline in the academic sphere. Based on the perception of history as constructed discourse about the past we will try to capture changes in the discursive practice of the party historiography throughout the fifties and sixties.

The article is divided into four chapters. The key opening chapter is devoted to the theoretical and methodological starting points, in which I attempt to challenge the method proposed by Vítězslav Sommer and analyse the development of the party historiography in the fifties and sixties using Kuhn's paradigm shift.¹ I propose an alternative approach based on the existence of one unchanging paradigm throughout the period in question, within which certain transformations of the discursive practice take place, or even rivalry among several different discourses. The other chapters analyse the different stages of the party historiography. These stages are three and they are divided into a period of Stalinist discourse in 1950–1956, a period of post-Stalinist discourse in 1956–1963, and finally, a period of Reformist discourse in 1963–1970. The principal objective is to explore the theoretical and methodological bases of all these stages of the party historiography and trace the basic variables in the explanatory and interpretive schemes which differentiate these phases.

¹ Vítězslav Sommer, *Angažované dějepísctví. Stranická historiografie mezi stalinismem a reformním komunismem (1950–1970)*, Praha 2011.



THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE OF THE PARTY HISTORIOGRAPHY

The party historiography is in my conception a relatively extensive concept. We can include in this category any synthesis, monograph, anthology or magazine article on the history of the Party and the Labour Movement, domestic or international, in the period under review. The party had an institutionalised historiography, of course, in the form of a central nervous system, whose brain and intellectual centre was the Institute of History of the Communist Party, in which all the nerve endings converged in the form of university departments, as well as a number of district and regional offices. The Institute of History of the Communist Party devised binding research plans and it is a question to what extent it was possible, for example, to document history in a region without a reference to such plans. I hardly think this was possible. Sommer also defines in his work the historian of the party as, “a member of a wide informal group of researchers connected in varying degrees and in different ways to this institution.”² In essence, it was a dense and interdependent network of individuals who were involved in some way in historical research and participated in some stage of the formation of historical knowledge.

I am of the opinion that the perception of party historiography as a conscious falsification of history is unproductive and is a blind alley in contemporary historiographic discourse. I view the party historiography of the fifties and sixties as standard historical science, that despite all the specifics had its binding rules and procedures, interpretative schemes and interpretative patterns that should be the subject of an unbiased approach *sine ira et studio*. I find tenable Sommer’s definition of history as constructed discourse about the past. In other words, each historiography at any time creates within its own discourse binding approaches and interpretations, which are not in their majority reconciled and often cannot be compatible, and as there is no single ideal historiography prescribing the only possible way of writing about the past, we cannot but admit a plurality of historiographies, and hence a plurality of scientific rules and interpretative schemes.³

Thus seen, the party historiography was a specific scientific discipline, where professionalism and partisanship did not stand against one another in irreconcilable opposition, but rather, it created a symbiosis of sorts, whose ideal was adherence to professionalism within the party approach. The combination of partisanship and scientific objectiveness should not be however regarded unilaterally through a dichotomy of superiority and inferiority, since the Party’s point of view was considered a prerequisite for any serious research and scientific objectivity. Science and politics were not mutually exclusive in the party historiography: they created a productive environment of interacting impulses. Thus the theory of Marxism-

2 Vítězslav Sommer, *Tři fáze stranického dějepisectví v padesátých a šedesátých letech*. In: Bohumil, Jiroušek et al, *Proměny diskursu české marxistické historiografie (Kapitoly z historiografie 20. století)*, České Budějovice 2008, p. 272.

3 Vítězslav Sommer, *Angažované dějepisectví. Stranická historiografie mezi stalinismem a reformním komunismem (1950–1970)*, Praha 2011, p. 51.

Leninism was not merely the straightjacket of party historians, though it created an inevitable paradigmatic basis of all research, but also an innovative impulse in the methodology, which was reflected for instance in a tendency to view history from below through the working class, but also in finding new periodisation milestones in the Czech history.

Like any other historiography, the party historiography was not produced in a vacuum, but rather arose as part of the contemporary political and social discourse, and thus inevitably had to possess all the characteristics of its time. Historians were forced to respect the mandatory party historiography paradigm, within which they created their own distinct historical narratives, demonstrating validity in the social and political context of the time. It is a moot point whether it is more appropriate to talk about the voluntary and active share of young emerging party historians in the formation of the new teaching schemes, which became an inherent part of the social and political discourse and about whose validity few members of that generation doubted, at least in the initial phase, than about forced respect. Therefore, the main criterion for judging the party historiography is not a utopian idea of historiography, creating its narratives independently of the social context, but rather, the idea of historiography, which actively responds and jointly creates new interpretative models valid in a specific historical context.⁴

Contrary to Sommer's methodological starting point, I believe that in the period in question no change in the paradigm of the party historiography ever happened. I regard the paradigm as a specific view of society or its substantial part, which involves an interpretation of the theory of society or a part thereof. It is usually performed in a specific language and uses a specific language, it is based on a specific methodology, arises from it or initiates it, addresses a relatively stable type of problems with relatively established procedures, and relies on a relatively stable group of authorities whose scientific activity serves as a model of science. Such a specific view of all the party historians throughout the period of the fifties and sixties was in my opinion the theory of Marxism-Leninism, the unquestioned leading role of the Party and the perception of history through the prism of partisanship, Socialism as the only possible and correct state and social system, class antagonism as a motive force in historical and social development, or the ubiquitous dichotomy of the revolutionary and reformist direction of the Labour Movement.

It might appear from these lines would that by my insistence on a single unalterable single paradigm I perceive our party historiography of the period under review as somewhat static, or at least, much less dynamic, than Sommer does in his work. This is only a misapprehension, because in no case do I deny a series of transformations or, more precisely, shifts in explanatory and theoretical-methodological premises of the party historiography of the period. Even in the periodisation of the key periods in which these changes occurred I basically concur with Sommer. I am just of the opinion that the concept of paradigm shift, as defined by Thomas Kuhn, is not an entirely appropriate methodological approach to the issue, as the very term 'paradigm' seems to me in this situation somewhat

4 Ibid, p. 51.



problematic. Therefore, in the next section I will try to outline an alternative, though in many respects similar, methodological approach.

I think that it is not too hard to identify the main sources of the historiographic paradigm of the fifties and sixties. This paradigm is, as already mentioned, the theory of Marxism-Leninism, the indisputable central role of the Communist Party and the party perceptions of history, the teleology of history associated with Socialism as the only possible social structure, and the opposition between the revolutionary and the reformist movement, which created an undeniable logical framework of any historical narrative and was the basis of all the interpretive patterns. The laws of the historical development of society formulated by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and specifically during the first half of the fifties by Stalin, were considered valid without further verification, or in other words, that historical research should look for clear evidence that this was indeed the case. Historical research was to find irrefutable evidence for a predetermined construct of history. As Bohumil Jiroušek remarks, such untested and uncontested propositions included the idea of increasing impoverishment of people throughout history, which leads to revolutions and in the end to Socialism and Communism as a remedy for this development.⁵ Any historian who did not start in his/her work from this paradigmatic base would be immediately proscribed and ostracised from the community of historians and persecuted by the state authorities.

How to analyse then the dynamics of the transformation of some historical narratives and interpretive methods, which undoubtedly took place in the period in question? I think the key concept is discourse or discursive practice with which we can replace the less appropriate concept of paradigm. By discourse I mean in this context a certain type of authoritative expression that embodies the distinguishing attributes of its time and of the period thinking and is basically situated in history. It is a dialogue held in a mandatory method, or a form of communication within a given cultural sphere governed by a set of implicitly recognised rules and laws. This form of dialogue means making constant claims to the validity, truth and legitimacy of arguments put forward. Claims to validity are verified in discourses.⁶ Specifically, by the debate about scientific discourse I understand the notion of scientific discourse about issues that are the subjects of scientific inquiry. Scientific discourse is conducted by individual actors in scientific discussion, either entering into a direct scientific discussion, or the discussion is mediated by materialised 'artefacts of science', which means, for example, books, scientific journals, studies, and other material carriers of scientific information. The result of scientific discourse is scientific communication.⁷ Thus defined, discourse has several characteristic features: 1) the ability to transmit certain information whose meaning is formed during the stylistic and interpretive activity of the author and the recipient of the text; 2) cohesion, coherence of its individual components, words and statements, expressed by sensory and formal language means; 3) situatedness, i.e. being set in a specific environment and defining

5 Bohumil Jiroušek, *Česká marxistická a marxisticko-leninská historiografie — možnosti a meze studia*, *Český časopis historický (ČČH)*, 2006, no. 4, p. 89.

6 Jiří Olšovský, *Slovník filozofických pojmů současnosti*, Praha 2011, p. 48.

7 František Ochrana, *Metodologie sociálních věd*, Praha 2013, p. 64.

the relation to an audience defined in specific social, opinion-related, generational or other terms: and 4) intertextuality, i.e. being tied to other texts, particularly evident in discourses oriented on discussion and polemic; 5) institutionality, i.e. following a method of organising relations between individuals or groups of individuals within an institution. The essential element of the organisation is the presence (expectedness) of constant properties of text within a range of types.⁸ The case of the party historiography involves a normatively oriented scientific discourse, where a normatively minded scientist is not content with mere observation and description of an analysed fact, but from the standpoint of normative criteria and assessed values analyses the problem through normative categories, such as the concepts of justice, good and evil, and with regard to value criteria produces a final statement of the facts.⁹ The normative view not only reconstructs the chronology of events, but it also looks for their meaning, and intention becomes a key concept for understanding the meaning of history.¹⁰

Despite some similarities with the definition of the paradigm, I see several distinctive characteristics here. First of all, I understand discourse as being in a sense subordinate to the paradigm, as period discourse can be only held on the basis of the knowledge and recognition of the validity of the period paradigm. In other words, the most common paradigm creates a general basis with which we can construct concrete historical narratives and interpretative processes that are part of the period discourse. Once again we can recall here the definition of history as constructed discourse about the past, discourse which is constructed in everyday interactions of a network of actors involved in the creation of narratives and verification of their validity in the period party historiography.

Kuhn's theory of paradigm change and scientific revolutions did not concede the coexistence of two different paradigms at the same time. Always, after accumulation of an unsustainable number of anomalies, the existing paradigm had to be replaced by a new paradigm. However, in my opinion, this model does not reflect exactly the situation in the party historiography in the fifties and sixties, especially after 1956 there was a series of parallel variable and competing discourses. In a very simplified form one can talk about a Stalinist, post-Stalinist, or Reformist discourse, which coexisted for years, intermingled in an interaction and created new historical narratives, although with the passing of time the Stalinist discourse was marginalised in favour of the post-Stalinist discourse. Even in the sixties, when the Reformist direction became de facto the historiographic mainstream, there were historians (Čestmír Amort, Václav Král), who did not accept the new discourse without getting necessarily out of the valid period paradigm.

Here I see the advantages of the discursive approach, which makes it easier to describe the dynamics and the complexity of the ongoing transformations in the period party historiography, when some historical narratives are changed, we need not talk immediately about a paradigm shift, when talking about the transformation

8 Světlá Čmejrková — Jana, Hoffmannová (eds.), *Jazyk, média, politika*, Praha 2003, p. 17.

9 František Ochrana, *Metodologie sociálních věd*, Praha 2013, pp. 69–70.

10 Světlá Čmejrková — Jana, Hoffmannová (eds.), *Jazyk, média, politika*, Praha 2003, p. 19.



of historical discourse is appropriate. In case of such a change it is not necessary to look for radical changes (scientific revolutions), which represent a fundamental break with the previous discourse, which is essentially incommensurable with the new discourse. Older discursive practice can coexist at the same time with newly emerging discursive practice and in a confrontation it can contribute to the creation of a new dominant discourse. Many common anomalies that occur continuously and are inconsistent with established historical narratives can be absorbed by a period discourse and can contribute to its continuous transformation or contribute to a temporary rivalry between pluralistic discourses, without challenging in any way the existing paradigm. It was only the discovery of an anomaly of a higher order, which is absolutely incompatible with the period paradigm that brings about a scientific revolution and the establishment of a new dominant paradigm. I believe that a change occurred in the discursive practice of the party historiography and not in the paradigm in the fifties and sixties because no anomaly that would have called into question the Marxist-Leninist paradigm appeared, and despite all the changes of the individual historical narratives and interpretive patterns and all the phases of the party historiography are commensurate.

As very problematic I also perceive the viewing of the second half of the 1950s as a period of normal established science periods or the paradigmatic period. According to Sommer, "During the second half of the fifties a paradigm of the party history was created. It included historical narratives considered as a binding interpretation of the history of the Communist Party and the Labour Movement,"¹¹ and also, "Seen from Kuhn's perspective, the paradigm established in the late fifties matched the party historiography in the phase of normal science. There were fixed research questions and interpretive patterns and the historians mastered narrative strategies."¹² Even if we proceeded on the assumption that the paradigm of the party history and the history of the Labour Movement was created in the second half of the fifties and not in the period preceding, I find the allegation of fixed interpretation patterns and mastered narrative strategies in this period rather bold, to put it mildly. It was precisely the first half of the fifties that was a period of relative stability and clear, even if highly simplified, interpretative schemes. The year 1956 and the 20th Congress of the CPSU, with Khrushchev's criticism of the personality cult and hence condemnation of the preceding Stalinist dogmatism, conversely meant a period of uncertainty and destabilisation of the interpretation patterns. After 1956 a number of professional journals sparked extensive theoretical and methodological discussions among the party's leading historians, in contrast with virtually non-existent theoretical discussions in the previous period. It would be also in stark contrast to the turbulent opinions controversy, which took place at that time in the field of Czech philosophy, which Michal Kopeček labels as a period of revisionism.¹³ Although the

11 Vítězslav Sommer, *Angažované dějepisectví. Stranická historiografie mezi stalinismem a reformním komunismem (1950–1970)*, Praha 2011, p. 153.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

13 Michal Kopeček, *Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce. Zrod a počátky marxistického revisionismu ve střední Evropě 1953–1960*, Praha 2009.

controversies in the party historiography were not as stormy as they were among the Marxist philosophers, it was in my opinion a period of uncertainty and rivalry between two basic discourses of the party historiography in its rigid form and reformist form.

I start in this essay from the assumption that the establishment of the paradigm of the party history occurred as early as the first half of the fifties and despite some spirited debates in the second half of the fifties it was only a transformation of some interpretation patterns rather than the establishment of a new paradigm. As I have already indicated, I believe that even in the founding phase of the party historiography, even if the main purpose was propaganda, there must have been a paradigm which remained unchanged throughout the period in question, only it adopted some newly formulated narrative strategies.

What was the situation regarding Sommer's formulation of the paradigm shift in the first half of the sixties? Did a Kuhnian scientific revolution and the establishment of a new paradigm, in this case a reformist one, take place? Again, I believe that it is not the case. I concur with the opinion of Bohumil Jiroušek that these were de facto different strategies, which should be viewed as disputes within the paradigm, as its part shifts, since only historians who did not declare themselves as followers of Marxism or dissociated themselves from it in some way put themselves out of reach of the reigning period paradigm.¹⁴ Such historians were unable to publish their work and were exposed to subsequent repression by the authorities. Such a story was not the fate of the party historiography in the late sixties; on the contrary, the majority of published outputs of the so-called reformist historiography became essentially the historiographic mainstream that never, not even in a single case, deviated from the basic paradigm.

Regarding the question of periodisation of the different stages of the party historiography the year 1956 is a significant milestone. In accordance with Sommer, I believe that in the first half of the fifties the publications had primarily a propaganda and didactic purpose. The question is how to characterise them and what periodisation milestones should be selected for the period 1956–1970. Sommer's characterisation of the second half of the fifties as a clearly defined period of historical narratives seems to me untenable. On the contrary, it was a period of considerable upheaval of opinion and methodology, and thus the formation of a new discourse of the party history, which in my opinion was transformed continuously until 1970. It is hard in this period to seek a clearly defined milestone as was the year 1956. Yet the years 1962–1963 can serve as a point of reference when a more radical transformation of the basic historical narratives began.

The issue of periodisation is related to the exact timing of the key moments of the emergence of new narrative strategies. How to trace accurately in the published texts the reaction of the party historians to the ideological atmosphere of relaxation or hardening, though, as pointed out by Bohumil Jiroušek, in the centrally planned economy the publication plans were made in many cases for several years ahead,

¹⁴ Bohumil Jiroušek, *Česká marxistická a marxisticko-leninská historiografie — možnosti a meze studia*, in: ČČH, 2006, no. 4, p. 903.



and published books were often outdated, having been overtaken by the events, or, on the contrary, something liberal was published at a time when this kind of things was forbidden.¹⁵ There is some distortion that a historian cannot avoid, but I reckon that with careful monitoring of the period periodicals and anthologies this deviation is relatively easy to eliminate. Unlike book production, the party magazines had a circulation and periodicity fixed in advance, and many articles had much greater flexibility of reaction to the period events. Most historians who worked on their monographies for several years, and in the course of their research published partial results of their studies on the pages of the party magazines (*Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ*, *Nová Mysl*, *Československý časopis historický*, *Zprávy kateder dějin SSSR a KSSS a dějin KSČ*) thus provide us with at least a partial correction of the partial time discrepancies at the time of publication of the final work.

THE PERIOD OF STALINIST DISCOURSE (1950-1956)

I start from the belief that it was in this period that the default paradigm of the party historiography was established, which despite some subsequent changes to some historical narratives was never abandoned until the beginning of the normalisation period and which we have already defined here. Here one can find all the basic schemes which became the starting point for the historical narratives over the next two decades. These basic postulates, albeit with minor modifications or altered radicalism, were never abandoned during the period, and formed the basis for the so-called commensurability of historical narratives that were the distinguishing feature of the unchanging paradigm of the party historiography.

The canonical text of the first phase of the party historiography and a sort of role model for all the party historians was “History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course.”¹⁶ The perspective of the partisan perception of history in the Stalinist form, as outlined in the “Short Course” became a binding model for the party historiography in Czechoslovakia in the first half of the 1950s. In fact, the partisan approach to history demanded the formulation of *a priori* assumptions, which more or less defend the position of one social group against other groups and historical research thus serves to gather a sufficient number of arguments, which become irrefutable proof of the initial standpoint. However, as pointed out by Sommer, in no case can we talk about violent and directive adoption of the Stalinist pattern into the party historiography in Czechoslovakia, since Stalin’s conception of historical knowledge and partisanship in science fell on fertile soil in Communist Czechoslovakia and an emphasis on utilising the results of historiography in practice and nationalism were in line with some long-established traditions present in the Czech historical thinking.¹⁷

15 Ibid., p. 898

16 Dějiny Všesvazové komunistické strany (bolševiků), Stručný výklad, Praha 1953.

17 Vítězslav, Sommer Angažované dějepisectví. Stranická historiografie mezi stalinismem a reformním komunismem (1950–1970), Praha 2011, p. 138.



The need for a utilitarian use of the party historiography in practice was a prerequisite for the creation of new historical narratives. The Communist Party needed to legitimise in the eyes of the public its seizure of power and the current political and social organisation. There was an urgent need to create a kind of founding myth of the party, which would explain to the masses the historical patterns of social development leading to a conflict-free harmonious arrangement of Soviet-style Socialism, the essence of class antagonism and the inevitable victory of the proletariat and clearly defined external and internal enemies of the Socialist system. The clear identification of hostile groups also served the urgent need to find the culprits behind the not-so-good state of the Socialist economy in the first half of the fifties and to justify or even arouse righteous anger among the popular classes in the ongoing political processes, which often resulted in harsh punishments that would be hardly acceptable in a normally functioning democratic society.

As the historical narratives were usable in the mass party propaganda and served as a basis for simplified propaganda slogans in political campaigns, a prerequisite for all such narratives was a schematic nature to be easily understood by lower social orders. The didactic concept of historical stories worked craftily with a simple black-and-white dichotomy dividing society and the world order into clearly defined 'us' and 'them'. Each ordinary citizen of the Socialist state should be aware of the fundamental differences between the Socialist and Capitalist establishment, and above, all the benefits and advantages of the former. Every such story had to create a semblance of historical irreversibility and to avoid any possibility of pluralistic interpretation of a 'science-based' conclusions. An axiomatic approach to all these narratives based on the correct interpretation of the Stalinist paradigm was taken for granted. Typically, in this concept of creating historical stories, very limited, selective and highly utilitarian use of archival sources was used, which were to be only illustrative of the kind of an *a priori* set of stories, and in the event of a fundamental contradiction between the party's vision of history and the language of archival sources it was not problematic to condemn, if need be, the results of archival research, which only met the standards of historical criticism of sources as objectivist and factual.¹⁸ Conversely, quotations from the classics of Marxism-Leninism were abundant. When writing about any topic a historian had to refer to Marx, Lenin, Stalin or Gottwald to confirm irrefutably his/her conclusions. Yet historical narratives shaped in this way cannot be characterised as excesses or anomalies, but as historical narratives corresponding to the specific nature of the Stalinist historical thinking.¹⁹

As indicated above, all of the historic work of the first half of the fifties was characterised by considerable didacticism, sometimes even schematic propaganda, which was of course at the expense of a more demanding methodological broaching of the topic, because the requirement for a utilitarian use of historical narratives in practice demanded an interpretation understandable by the masses of working people. For

18 Martin Sabrow, *Historiografie NDR jako badatelský problém*, *Soudobé dějiny*, 2000, no. 1-2, p. 28.

19 Vítězslav Sommer, *Angažované dějepiscectví. Stranická historiography mezi stalinismem a reformním komunismem (1950-1970)*, Praha 2011, p. 138.



these reasons, this always involved de facto simply told stories of an empirical-political character, which showed no signs of a deeper theoretical sophistication, even if their authors could often be of the opinion that a sufficient number of references to the classics of Marxism-Leninism were sufficient to indicate the theoretical and methodological anchoring. Also, it is remarkable that although one of the paradigmatic moments of the party historiography and in fact the key principle of all historical development was class antagonism, in no part of the period do we encounter the need for any further, explicitly expressed definition of a class or the working class and, by extension, class struggle, and not even in the sixties, when the need for thorough theoretical understanding of the issue was already on the agenda. A logical explanation seems to be that the general and explicitly inarticulate requisite for all the works written in the fifties and sixties is the Marxist understanding of the concept of class, which it regards as a particular group of people whose class belonging is determined objectively, based on their position in the period socio-economic structure, which is independent of any subjective experience and articulation of the experience of the members of the class.²⁰

THE PERIOD OF POST-STALINIST DISCOURSE (1956–1963)

The second half of the fifties marked an important turning point in the party historiography. A key milestone was the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (“CPSU”) in February 1956, which condemned the doctrinal excesses of the preceding period, and Khrushchev’s speech against the cult of personality which triggered a wave of de-Stalinisation throughout the Eastern Bloc. This change in the political and social atmosphere was inevitably reflected in the approach to the history of the Party and the creation of new historical narratives that to some extent tried to break up the rigid dogmatism and schematism of the first half of the fifties. A characteristic feature of many debates was the demand for according the party historiography the status of a science, so that it would become a proper scientific discipline, based on a professional approach and honest work with archival sources. Historians should cease to constantly quote the classics of Marxism-Leninism, specifically Stalin and Gottwald, which could no longer be regarded as a sufficiently scientific approach to writing the history of the Party. Naturally enough, the process of de-Stalinisation and the associated break with the previous period had strict limits. “There was an apparent contradiction between the starting and officially announced de-Stalinisation and trying to keep this process within certain limits so as not to delegitimise not only the existing party establishment, but also the Communist political project as such.”²¹

20 See Michal Pullmann — Jakub Rákosník, *Dělnická třída v moderní sociální historiografii, Dějiny — teorie — kritika*, 2007, no. 2, pp. 271–288; Jakub Rákosník, *Třídní boj v marxistické historiografii*. In: Bohumil Jiroušek et al, *Proměny diskursu české marxistické historiografie (Kapitoly z historiografie 20. století)*, České Budějovice 2008, pp. 287–300.

21 Vítězslav Sommer, *Angažované dějepiscectví. Stranická historiography mezi stalinismem a reformním komunismem (1950–1970)*, Praha 2011, p. 155.



In my opinion, the impossibility of challenging the Communist project as such made it impossible to abandon the basic paradigm of the party history. Therefore, I will start in this sub-section from the thesis of a gradually changing discourse of the party history while preserving the basic paradigmatic assumptions and interpretative patterns. The limit not to be exceeded for all newly emerging historical narratives was Marxism-Leninism, the unquestioned leading role of the Party, and the associated perception of teleological history. Yet the current historical narratives were doubtless gradually transformed and became part of the newly formed party discourse of history. It was a period of heated discussions in the first phase of de-Stalinisation, and challenging the stereotypes of interpretation schemes helped, according to Sommer, seemingly paradoxically, the empowerment of party historiography, exposed to an effort to discredit it, especially by the historians of the Historical Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, since the acceptance of this criticism and the subsequent debates helped to establish a new form of post-Stalinist party historiography, which laid the foundation for the discipline in the second half of the fifties.²² Unlike Sommer, I believe that in this period we can talk about a phase of proto-revisionist party historiography.²³

A significant change in the development of the party historiography after 1956, compared with the previous period, was a number of theoretical and methodological articles in the periodicals. One of the first critical harbingers was an article by Koloman Gajan, Josef Macek and Zdeněk Šolle published in June 1956 in *Nová mysl* and a similar contribution critical of the period of the personality cult by Vladimír Dubský published on the pages of *Československý časopis historický*, which was essentially a polemical review of a book by Zdeněk Bradáč.²⁴ It was harsh criticism of the personality cult and the period of Stalinist stage of the party historiography, which was characterised by obedient following of the results of Soviet historical science. The question remains to what extent the authors were aware of their share in the dogmatic deviation and whether they also perceived their contributions in this context as self-criticism, since self-reflection is not very obvious anywhere, which is of course a more general problem with articles of this type, where a younger generation of party historians party disavows the previous developments without being willing to admit its share of the blame. In practice, the objective of criticism is mindless kowtowing to the authorities and citing the classics of Marxism-Leninism, which is a typical manifestation of a lack of philosophical ingenuity. The historians were inadequately equipped theoretically and the failure to master the materialist scientific method led to contempt of objective reality and its replacement by a mere idealistic subjectivism. This period was, according to Dubský, typified by a lack of knowledge of the facts, which was due to the dogmatic approach and incorrect understanding of partisanship in scientific work, and in the end only served to fulfil

22 Ibid, p. 176.

23 Ibid, p. 162.

24 Koloman Gajan — Josef Macek — Zdeněk, Šolle, K některým problémům naší historické vědy, *Nová mysl*, 1956, no. 6, pp. 636–640, Vladimír, Dubský, K otázce vědeckého zpracování vývoje KSČ in 1921–1925, *ČsČH*, 1957, no. 5, pp. 549–555.



a priori schemes and theses. The authors dissociate themselves from a strict black-and-white dichotomy, which was applied in the evaluation of the historical actors and their division into a reactionary or progressive ‘camp’ and hold that individual deviations in the party politics cannot explain individual betrayal of individual persons, but need to be attributed to errors in the overall party policy, “since personalities who played an important progressive role could not make a mistake in their development, occurring errors were necessarily obscured, ignored [...] On the other hand, personalities who eventually compromised themselves or left the party could not have, starting from their birth, any positive trait, any credit in life, even though the actual development was not so simple”.²⁵ They referred thus to the absolute subordination of historical science and its subjection in campaigning work which resulted in a very frequent and violent update of a historical fact.

This radical critique of dogmatism and the cult of personality however concealed a potential risk of revisionist tendencies that might go as far as to justify bourgeois historiography, in particular positivism and objectivism in historical science. This risk was pointed out by Zdeněk Bradáč in his response to Vladimír Dubský and especially by the veteran party historiographer Jan Pachta.²⁶ According to Pachta, strict adherence to the party line was to create a counterweight to the radical critique of the party historiography, which could delegitimise this historical project. It was obvious that Pachta could not ignore the developments after the 20th Congress of the CPSU and had to formulate his arguments so that they could hold their own in the period discourse and, at the same time, come to terms with the mistakes in the period of the personality cult. It is seen that after 1948 there was a mighty onset of Marxism-Leninism, although, “the rapid ideological development goes hand in hand with some serious flaws, such as vulgarisation, dogmatism, rigidity, and some errors and shortcomings resulting from the cult of personality”.²⁷ On the other hand, Pachta notes that the 20th Congress also postulated the requirement for combating all forms of revisionism. Consistent following of the party line and creative mastery of Marxism-Leninism were to be the right tools for overcoming these dangerous tendencies. “If our historical science is to fulfil its mission in the fight against revisionism, it must become a real militant science, consistently applying the Leninist principle of partisanship of science, and must get rid of some bourgeois anachronisms and everything that has so far hindered its creative nature. Historical science based on the theory of Marxism-Leninism is a party science as it accords with the interests of the working class and of all working people.”²⁸ By outmoded bourgeois opinions he meant in particular the danger of *objectivism* and

²⁵ Ibid, p. 638.

²⁶ Zdeněk Bradáč, Poznámky k některým obecným problémům studia dějin KSČ ve dvacátých letech (Na okraj diskusního článku Vladimíra Dubského), ČsČH, 1958, no. 3, pp. 325–334; Jan Pachta, Důsledněji uplatňovat leninskou zásadu stranickosti v naší historické vědě, Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ, 1957, no. 1, pp. 5–14.

²⁷ Jan Pachta, Důsledněji uplatňovat leninskou zásadu stranickosti v naší historické vědě, in: Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ 1/1957, p. 8.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 11.



positivism, but also *economism*, which tries to explain historical developments only as automatic actions of economic forces without the revolutionary activities of humans. If a historian follows the party line, according to Pachta, he takes the only correct, objective and scientific position.

The effort to take some sort of middle ground between propaganda writing in the Stalinist period, but at the same time avoiding monochrome criticism of what has hitherto been done in historiography after 1948 was characterised in an essay by the party historiography veteran Pavel Reiman *Za důsledné uplatnění historického materialismu v dějinách Komunistické strany Československa*.²⁹ In his article we can feel the efforts for giving the historical science the status of a real science. According to Reiman, the current development of historical science suggests that the major weakness in the historians' approach has so far been incomplete mastery of the Marxist theory, insufficient standard when using the method of dialectical and historical Materialism, bias in the interpretation of historical facts, and inability to generalise in Marxist terms the experiences of the working class. He understands the party history as an inseparable part of Marxism-Leninism and as a means for its dissemination among the masses of working people. "The point is that Marxism is not a dogma, but a generalisation of the experience of the working class. Therefore, Marxism is constantly developing and enriching itself based on the experience of the class struggle. Without this no further development of Marxism is possible and in this sense the party history constitutes an inseparable part of Marxism-Leninism. The formulation that the party history is Marxism-Leninism in action therefore best expresses the crux of the matter."³⁰ Finally, Reiman also rejected the call of some historians for the abolition of the position of party historiography as an independent scientific discipline. He acknowledged the fact that the general history and the party history are communicating vessels and the history of the party and of the labour movement cannot be interpreted without knowledge of the broader developments and the methods used in historical research must be similar. On the other hand, he saw some non-negligible differences which unequivocally justify the separate existence of the party historiography and thus cannot be reduced to a common part of the general historiography.

To a similar note are tuned the papers by Jaroslav Kladiiva.³¹ Kladiiva primarily defends the Party's approach to historical research. He does not perceive the party line in a historian's work as subordinate to political tasks or starting from preconceived schemes; on the contrary, he defines partisanship as one of the most important features of the historian's method, which is a consequence of his Marxist view and his class position and finds then its objective confirmation in the historical material. Use of the party line enables us to reveal the essence of the phenomena

29 Pavel Reiman, *Za důsledné uplatnění historického materialismu v dějinách Komunistické strany Československa*, *Nová mysl*, 1957, no. 3, pp. 233–247.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

31 Jaroslav Kladiiva, *K metodologickým otázkám dějin KSČ, ČsČH 1958*, no. 3, pp. 334–344; Jaroslav Kladiiva, *K problematice práce historiků v nejnovějších dějinách, Zprávy kateder dějin KSČ a dějin SSSR a KSSS*, 1959, no. 2, pp. 77–91.



being explored and to faithfully reproduce objective historical processes. If a party historian employs correctly the method of dialectical and historical Materialism, if he consistently starts from the position of the working class, which is always in accord with the objective truth, then he cannot go wrong, according to Kladiiva. Kladiiva then sees no contradiction when a party historian is equally a committed propagandist, because only scientifically treated and interpreted historical facts may attract the attention of domestic and foreign readers to the party propaganda work. Kladiiva holds, to paraphrase Karl Marx, that the task of the social sciences is not to explain the world but to change it.³²

Kladiiva also examines the relationship between the history of the party and the general history, which he perceives as being dialectical, because the Communist Party is an inevitable product of a particular stage of historical development and has an active influence on shaping historical events. He tries to deal with the issue of the general and the special in the history of the party. The basic Marxist-Leninist principles are for him, of course, universally applicable, but he warns against a tendency to apply them in their general form, without being adapted to specific conditions. In this context he offers a careful critique of adopting the experiences of the CPSU, while recognising that these experiences are essential. He points out the opposite danger of using only special omissions from the general precepts, which leads to a national Communism. To him, the party historiography is a fully defensible independent discipline. "Studying the history of the Communist parties has a high moral value, because it is a conscious effort to study the victory of human beings over what are essentially primitive natural instincts, which are in control of the world of dehumanised bourgeois relations."³³

The matter of the theoretical and methodological inconsistencies in the party historiography of the second half of the fifties was settled for once and all by the 3rd Congress of Historians in September 1959. At the Congress some of the above-mentioned historians (Macek, Bradáč, Kladiiva, Pachta, Šolle), who were joined by a few other (Veselý, Bárta) read their papers. As they put forward the arguments mentioned above, there is no need to focus on the individual speeches. In general, one could feel an effort to find again a balanced way to give scientific status to the party historiography, based on a thorough study of archival sources, but in such a way as not to lose political commitment. The key criterion of scientific quality was consistent yet inventive use of the theory of Marxism-Leninism, which had to be inextricably linked to partisanship in scientific research. Warnings were reiterated against the excesses of vulgar dogmatism and the cult of personality, and against the danger of slipping to impermissible revisionism, which manifested itself as penetration of bourgeois historiography tendencies in the form of objectivism and positivism into the party historiography. Thematically, the emphasis was placed on increased intensity of research in contemporary history and the history of the international labour movement, which would be crowned by a collective synthetic work. The results of historical research were to be actively connected with the present, as the

³² Ibid., p. 82.

³³ Ibid., p. 82.

function of the social sciences and historiography in particular, should be an effort not only to explore the world, but also to change it.



THE PERIOD OF REFORMIST DISCOURSE (1963–1970)

Right at the beginning of this chapter it should be noted that by the term Reformist historiography, which I use for the party historiography after 1963, I mean the relationship between the party historiography and the revival process and its contribution to the creation of legitimation strategies that could provide support for reform Communism, rather than thinking that after 1963 there was a fundamental reform of the party historiography proper. On the other hand, the reformist historiography was not an immovable monolith and the shift of interpretation and interpretive schemes that reflect the theoretical and methodological discussions in the periodicals of that time will be the focus of this chapter.

The year 1963 was to be a turning point in the party historiography, when according to Sommer's assertion a new binding paradigm which replaced the previous paradigm gradually began to form. Here we are facing in my opinion a fundamental problem, because if we agree that the paradigm began to change around 1963, it would be indispensable after abandoning the old paradigm to formulate a new paradigm. It is hard to imagine that a number of party historians would abandon the old paradigm automatically and accepted and understood the new paradigm without an explicit formulation. Such a change would certainly have sparked a number of heated discussions, methodological disputes and interpretive blind alleys that would have filled the pages of the party periodicals. Moreover, such animated discussions and controversies would certainly have lasted for several years, as the idea that the new paradigm in the social sciences would be de facto stabilised within a maximum of two years seems to me extremely unlikely. Since the ability to change a paradigm by one ground-breaking discovery, as in the natural sciences, is all but impossible in the social sciences, in the social sciences there is quite common coexistence of multiple paradigms that are shaped over several years. The problem is that we never encounter such paradigmatic debates and polemics anywhere, let alone an explicitly formulated new paradigm. In this case, we cannot but admit that no new paradigm was created and any shifts in explanatory diagrams and interpretive patterns, which formed the basis of the historical narratives in the late sixties, were constructed on the basis of the paradigm formulated in the fifties.

Of course, the claim that in a given period there appeared absolutely no methodological articles would not be accurate or correct. Some articles of this nature were published (Kaplan, Křen, Macek, Michal Reiman, Pavel Reiman, Měchýř, Niklíček), but in all cases these were articles that further developed in their interpretations the content, perhaps in a more radical and more explicit form, the topics already outlined in the methodological debate at the end of the fifties.³⁴ The

³⁴ Karel Kaplan, *Aktuální úkoly dějin KSČ*, *Nová mysl*, 1963, no. 1, pp. 62–70; Josef Macek, *Naléhavé problémy historické vědy*, *Nová mysl*, 1963, no. 9, pp. 1043–1051; Pavel Rei-



object of all these articles was criticism of the personality cult influence on the party historiography. As a result of the cult of personality, there were deformations in the correct application of the leading role of the Party, which revelled in complacency and prevented a critical view of its past. The party historiography in the Stalinist period served as a mirror of the Party's successes, while all the failures and mistakes were glossed over. Criticism was also levelled at the influence of the cult of personality on the methodological basis of the discipline, which meant that most of the works from this period were strongly marked by an emphasis on the crucial role of the individual in the life of the Party and helped to strengthen the cult of personality. Warnings were repeatedly voiced against the dangers of dogmatism. The stagnation of theoretical thinking and the significant reduction of the creative potential of the party historians were perceived as other abuses in the period of personality cult. Nonetheless, the calls for *scientification* and consistent application of the theoretical basis of Marxism-Leninism were not new and only developed in a more consistent form the debates already started at the end of the fifties. Emphatic demands were made for a move away from mere descriptiveness and factography, which was no science. According to Reiman and Křen, the party historiography was stuck in a vicious circle, basically robbing Peter to pay Paul, trying to replace a speculative pseudo-dogmatism and making a fetish of factography, and so it arrived to the dangerous waters of positivism and objectivism. In their opinion, this vicious circle could only be broken by the application of creative thinking in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism.

Again there were the familiar criticisms of the reduction of theory to mere parroting of quotations from the works of the classics of Marxism-Leninism, which were an unquestionable dogma and formed the basis for *a priori* propositions, which were only fulfilled *ex post* and illustrated with purposely chosen historical materials. Měchýř and Niklíček formulated a sort of black-and-white dichotomy in the party historiography, drawing an imaginary dividing line between those who participated in shaping the dogmatic discourse in the period of the personality cult and those who tried to resist it.³⁵ The leading light was of course the first group of historians, who mostly did not know the basics of the historian's craft and subordinated the party historiography to purely political and educational interests, while historians who tried to faithfully follow the history of the party as a multifaceted historical process, and who sought to have the party historiography become an important component of the cognitive activities of the Party were often ostracised and labelled demagogically as searchers of errors. The culprit responsible for this unsatisfactory state of affairs is easily identified by Měchýř and Niklíček: It

man, Úvahy o úkolech historiografie strany po XII. sjezdu KSČ, Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ, 1963, no. 2, pp. 163–176; Jan Křen — Michal Reiman, K syntéze našich novodobých dějin, Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ, 1963, no. 2, pp. 208–226; Jan Měchýř — Ladislav Niklíček, O problémech vývoje historiografie československého dělnického hnutí po únoru 1948, Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ, 1964, no. 1, pp. 60–71; Jan Křen, K metodickým otázkám moderních dějin, Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ, 1966, no. 3, pp. 323–351.

³⁵ Given their age, both authors were spared personal self-reflection in this period as Měchýř only began to publish at the end of the fifties and Niklíček at the beginning of the sixties.

was the Institute of the History of the Communist Party, “which appeared in public as guardian of the purity of ideas, and in fact became the guardian of dogma. Also, its publishing activities, focusing mainly on the published writings of Klement Gottwald and selected documents in support of those writings, in fact, made it difficult for historians to explore what were otherwise very difficult to access source materials. Today it is widely known that keynote speeches were left out of Gottwald’s writings, the documents were abridged and selected according to non-scientific criteria”.³⁶ In conclusion of their article the authors even allege that the history of the labour movement was falsified, against which there was practically no defence, for if the author protected himself with quotations from the classics of Marxism-Leninism, there was no way to prove that such publications were not scientific and sound.

One of the most interesting contributions to this issue has been presented by Miloš Hájek.³⁷ Once again there is criticism of the arguments regarding the infallibility of the leading party figures. One task of the party historiography would be also to reconsider the relation to the Social Democrats by elaboration of the conclusions of the 20th Congress, which gave a clear signal for the overcoming of the sectarian and dogmatic approach to this issue. Here we see again an apparent return to the year 1956 as a turning point in the party historiography, albeit with the obvious reproach that the party historiography in the second half of the fifties and the early sixties did not unlock this potential, so it would be necessary to go back to these theses again and incorporate them fully into the newly created historical narratives. To my mind, Hájek’s approach to the reconsideration of the activities of the Social Democrats clearly showed the limits and possibilities of the reform historiography.

To him, the theory of Marxism-Leninism and Lenin’s statements are an essential starting point and requisite for a proper scholarly approach, but not its automatic guarantee, as no guarantee against error exists. According to Hájek, Truth and Marxism cannot be in principle monopolised, and if any scientific community entertains an illusion about having a monopoly on Truth, it gets to the “slippery slope of one who lacks self-criticism”. With a reference to Lenin, he admitted in certain aspects the possibility of a plurality of correct views. “With the fervour of a scientist Lenin assumed that the Communists are right, and because there is only one Truth, he would not have any ideological compromise. But, as a scientist, though most fervid, he acknowledged that an opposing school whose concepts we challenge may have some Truth, specifically, the Social Democrats can sometimes be right against the Communists.”³⁸ If the party historiography overcomes the sectarian tendencies towards the Social Democrats, it can make its contribution to the creation of action unity of the working class, which remains the Party’s main task into the future.

36 Jan Měchýř — Ladislav Niklíček, O problémech vývoje historiografie československého dělnického hnutí po únoru 1948, Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ, 1964, no. 1, p. 67.

37 Miloš Hájek, K některým problémům boje proti dogmatismu v historiografii mezinárodního dělnického hnutí, Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ, 1963, no. 5.

38 Miloš Hájek, K některým problémům boje proti dogmatismu v historiografii mezinárodního dělnického hnutí, Příspěvky k dějinám KSČ, 1963, no. 5, p. 738.





In fact, Hájek develops, as he acknowledges explicitly, the conclusions of the 20th Congress about overcoming sectarianism in the Party's politics. Admitting a plurality of views in some partial aspects, but with undoubted primacy of the theory of Marxism-Leninism, which if properly applied, leads to the only possible knowledge of Truth and helps the formation of the correct political line of the Party, which is in my opinion one of the distinctive characteristics of the party historiography in the second half of the sixties."³⁹

The thesis of the greater theoretical sophistication and *scientification* of the historical work, together with overcoming all residues from the period of the cult of personality and the rejection of endless citations of the classics of Marxism-Leninism, which are the main focus of all of those articles, is in my opinion only an echo of the methodological discussions in the years 1957–1959 that we outlined in the previous chapter. As the reproaches gave the impression of a certain disenchantment with unfulfilled expectations aroused by the 20th Congress of the CPSU, it is necessary to repeat them in a more radical form, so that they are finally fulfilled and the party historiography becomes a real science with a clearly formulated theoretical and methodological apparatus. In this respect, I find symptomatic an assertion of Karel Kaplan. "The consequences of the cult of personality in the history of the Party and in practice have been gradually overcome by the historians. Especially since the year 1956 and the 20th Congress of the CPSU, the process has developed rapidly. Creative forces of historians have been given a free rein and some stimulating and valuable historical works have been produced, with many more in progress. However, the process is far from being over." He also stresses the need to address methodological issues that are still at an embryonic stage, "although some attempts were made after the 20th Congress of the CPSU".⁴⁰ It is symptomatic that all the authors consider a turning point, a kind of caesura in the development of the party historiography, the year 1956. The period 1963–1964 was not to be a break with the developments after the 20th Congress, but rather, it was to be a follow-up to it and amplify a number of topics raised, which had not yet been done. As Kaplan emphasises, the process initiated in the party historiography after the 20th Congress was far from over.

The question also arises whether these papers, apart from criticising the practices in the period of the personality cult, proposed some constructive alternatives, which were not formulated after the 20th Congress. The thesis of *scientification* and the emphasis on theory we already know from the previous period and moreover, they were only formulated in general terms, without a specific methodological approach. Equally, true knowledge of the Party's history that was to serve in the present and in the future to establish a correct political line was no novelty. "I believe that one of the main tasks of the party history is to submit a truthful, unbiased interpretation of the historical developments, showing the historical truth, which necessitates getting rid of various subjectivist and schematic views accumulated during the cult of personality. Furthermore, the task of the party history is to more and more effectively intervene in the Party's cognitive process in the performance of its leadership role

³⁹ Karel Kaplan, Aktuální úkoly dějin KSČ, Nová mysl, 1963, no. 1, p. 64.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 65.

in general, so that the social function of history is fulfilled in its full strength and breadth.”⁴¹ We can find more similar statements made by Kaplan, which only remain at the level of general proclamations. They mostly clamour for true knowledge of the historical developments, but do not provide guidance on how to achieve this. Frankly speaking, without a specific formulation of methodological methods every historian can imagine just about anything under the terms ‘true knowledge’ and ‘undistorted interpretation of historical developments’, naturally within the Party’s impassable boundaries.

I believe that no fundamental formulation of an alternative approach to the historian’s work was made as a follow-up to the formulation made at the end of the fifties during the methodological discussions after the 20th Congress. With hindsight, the party historians were increasingly aware of the excesses during the period of the personality cult and dissociated themselves from it unequivocally. The task of the party historiography should be a definitive break with the dogmatic deviations, thereby reinforcing the tendencies, which in embryonic form began to appear after the 20th Congress. The advanced arguments were more radicalised and new topics were to be incorporated into the period discourse of the party history to acquire a truer knowledge of the past, and thereby a more appropriate definition of the political line of the Communist Party into the future.



41 Ibid, p. 64.