

Kateřina Kolářov, Martina Winkler (eds.)

RE/IMAGINATIONS OF DISABILITY IN STATE SOCIALISM

Visions, Promises, Frustrations

Disability History

campus

Re/imaginings of Disability in State Socialism

Disability History

Edited by Gabriele Lingelbach, Elsbeth Bösl and Maren Möhring

Volume 8

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Introduction: Visions, Promises, Frustrations: Disability and the Socialist Project

Kateřina Kolářová, Martina Winkler

Socialism, whenever it was declared victorious, was presented as a vision of a radically improved future. Be it in 1917 Russia or – if modified and somehow damped in their revolutionary impetus – in the years after 1945 in Eastern Europe: newly established regimes controlled by communist parties proclaimed the beginning of new paths into “better tomorrows”, designed “new men” (as well as women as children) and promised fundamental enhancement in all social fields. The new socialist society was supposed to facilitate rationality, efficiency and prosperity, a vision linked closely with both narrative and visual representations of healthy, abled, happy and resilient people.¹

The strong prominence of able-bodiedness in *visions* of futurity, and the ways in which they focus on everyone’s productive role in building a socialist society, raise the question as to how such emphases on the ability to work and fitness could be made compatible with socialist visions of a universal happiness and humanity that would also include people that did not fulfil the norm of ablebodied- (and ableminded)ness. To put it more pointedly, how did societies that proclaimed to be built on the principles of socialist humanism advocating all-encompassing visions of justice and social equality while making work a moral imperative deal with physical and mental difference? How did disability arrest, transform, or tax the *promises* of a perfect society? And, finally, how did disability register and reveal the *frustrations* of such utopian visions and building socialist societies?

It might seem surprising to talk of utopia and social equality in state socialism and combine this with a focus on disability, given the tradition of dark images connecting socialism with neglect and abandonment, depicting

1 Nečasová, *Nový socialistický člověk*; Rolf, “Die schönen Körper des Kommunismus”; Lebow, “Public Works”; Moore, *Healthy Comrades*.

“children in dilapidated orphanages [and] military veterans in uniform begging on street corners”.² *Re/Imaginations of Disability in State Socialism* lends nuance to our understanding of how the socialist state defined, enabled and frustrated the citizenship of people with disabilities, of how differently it approached diverse groups of people with disabilities and various forms of disabilities. In this way, it offers a corrective to the widely held beliefs that disabled people were simply (made) invisible and that the state merely tried to “get rid of them”.³ And most importantly, this volume hopes to illustrate how dis/ability – often in interaction with other categories – coarticulated visions of socialism as well as its frustrations.

The direct yet complex relationship between disability and socialist utopian aspirations offers exciting opportunities for innovative historical research and for a new critical perspective on both state socialism and disability. *Re/Imaginations of Disability in State Socialism* reflects on the utopian ambition of socialism, its limitations, internal conflicts, and paradoxes. Spot-lighting the analytical potential of disability history and historical scholarship focused on disability, our volume primarily contributes to scholarship on state socialism in Eastern Europe. In doing so, it draws attention to countries and societies that do not usually take centre stage in research on state socialism. Traditionally, histories of socialism – even more so histories of disability in socialism – are written with an emphasis on the Soviet Union. Facilitated by the opportunity to conduct research with particular focus on the history of Czechoslovakia and with contributions discussing disability (cultural) politics in Bulgaria, the GDR, Poland and the Soviet Union, this volume hopes to offer a more layered perspective on disability history in state socialist societies. Thus it also demonstrates that Eastern European societies did not constitute a homogeneous socialist “bloc” or a group of “satellite countries” following the leadership of Soviet Union without critical reflection.⁴

The research interest in Eastern Europe as well as in Russia/the Soviet Union has been founded on the perception of the region as “different”. Tellingly, in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, one of the first publications on the topic, the editors open what is in many aspects a ground-breaking book by noting that

2 Rasell/Iarskaia-Smirnova, “Conceptualising Disability”, 1.

3 Cit. in Sinecká, “Peeping over the Wall”, 223.

4 For a detailed discussion of intra-socialist relations, see: Hrešanová/Michaels, “Socialist Science Across Borders”; Applebaum, “The Friendship Project”.

“the Soviet Union is different. Although it is in the northern tier of the worlds’ population, it does not share the great wealth of Western Europe and North America and therefore is in many ways excluded from adopting the recently developed simple – i.e., technological and financial – solutions to the problems of the disabled that have been applied elsewhere in the northern tier.”⁵

It is certainly not by accident that many studies on disability in Russia and Eastern Europe focus on the post-socialist era and the transition to capitalism, i.e. the time when the formerly socialist region allegedly converged into Western structures.⁶ Recent works, however, have demonstrated very clearly and convincingly not only that “disability can serve as a lens for understanding Eastern Europe”,⁷ but also that the focus on socialist societies offers innovative insights and important theoretical and methodological challenges to the established canon of disability history and disability studies more broadly.

Drawing on this rapidly expanding and exciting archive of work, *Re/Imaginations of Disability* asks what notions, cultural representations of disability and forms of disability governance developed over the several decades of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. The focus on the dynamic and tense relationship between visions, promises and frustrations of the socialist project allows the book to spotlight disability as a novel vantage point from which to reflect on the utopian ambitions of socialism, its limitations, internal conflicts, and paradoxes.

Indeed, the approach to disability (as a category of difference) and to people with disabilities in socialist societies represents one such central paradox. As a human experience, disability was not excluded from, but rather recognised and written into the imaginations of socialist societies. The socialist utopia and optimism were founded on the belief that human beings adapt to their environment and develop with it.⁸ The vision of the adjustable humanity explicitly included people with disabilities. Moreover, people with disabilities were often to model that adaptation and demonstrate how socialism offered opportunities for their self-development and self-transformation. For instance, Claire Shaw’s chapter “*Just Like It Is at Home!*” *Soviet*

5 McCagg/Siegelbaum, “Introduction”, 4; See also: Friedman/Hudemann (eds.), *Diskriminiert, vernichtet, vergessen*.

6 For a critical approach, see: Mladenov, “Neoliberalism, Postsocialism, Disability”; Kolářová, “The Inarticulate Post-Socialist Crip”; Hartblay, *I Was Never Alone*.

7 Rasell/Iarskaia-Smirnova, “Conceptualising Disability”.

8 Moore, “For the People’s Health”.

Deafness and Socialist Internationalism during the Cold War accentuates how the creation of the “Soviet deaf person” allowed international networks between deaf people across the socialist countries.

However, as Shaw also observes, the belief in human adaptability was firmly attached to a normative horizon of improvement; change was to lead to a perfect version of humanity. Since socialist societies linked disability – and other differences such as ethnicity/race, gender, and class – to social and material inequalities and injustices, disability was proclaimed to disappear once more advanced stages of socialism (and eventually communism) arrive. The stubborn persistence and irreducibility of disabilities stood as a challenge to visions of progress and socialist utopia, even calling into questions the very achievements of socialism. Thus *Re/Imaginations of Disability in State Socialism* demonstrates both that (and how) dis/ability functioned as a central category of the socialist imagination of a socially just and equal society and how disability challenged and called into question the process of building socialist society and its success.

The tension between the utopian able-bodiedness and disability held great potential for socialist propaganda and politics. Consequently, socialist regimes embraced it early on. *Promises* of and measures for better healthcare were included in most socialist programmes. This was frequently triggered by dire need: in October 1917, the Bolsheviks were confronted with raging epidemics, devastating famine and rocketing mortality rates. Although the party had not discussed public health extensively in the years before they came to power, the instalment of a centralised health system was among the revolutionary regime’s first actions.⁹ Similarly, if less extreme, both the Soviet Union and recently installed socialist regimes in Eastern Europe had to deal with the consequences of World War II as well as general problems in public health: great numbers of war wounded,¹⁰ enduring high mortality rates in infants, the dangers of tuberculosis or the human costs of polio remained severe challenges into the early 1950s. When socialist regimes developed the knowledge, the administration and the propaganda apparatus to deal with such issues, they were not only reacting to acute crises; they were also meeting established expectations of a modern state’s responsibilities.

Since the mid-19th century at the latest, the concept of public health as a tool for improving life and facilitating overall able-bodiedness had been

⁹ Starks, *The Body Soviet*.

¹⁰ War veterans have been researched extensively: Edele, *Soviet Veterans of World War II*; Friedman, “The Bodily Disabled as a Poster Boy-Veteran”; Fieseler, *Arme Sieger*.

emerging as a crucial element of social and political thought.¹¹ Whatever the diverging explanations for and responses to epidemics or high mortality rates, whatever the varying priorities assigned to individual freedoms, economic considerations or the interests of society as a whole, in modern societies, health and able-bodiedness were considered social and political issues of great importance. As Douglas Bayton notes, “The bright future of the modern world has been typically imagined as a place where everyone would be intelligent, youthful, strong, and independent [...] and live free from defect and disease.”¹²

Parts of this story – the Western chapters – are well known: politicians such as German chancellor Otto von Bismarck had initiated concepts of health insurance and scientists such as John Snow or Rudolf von Virchow had researched and discussed the infrastructure in modern cities. But hygiene also became a key concept in Russia and Eastern Europe, and hospitals and vaccination routines were established all over Europe as elements of modern, sometimes nationalist or colonising politics.¹³ If modern states were dependent on their populations as economic resources and sources of political legitimacy, they had to keep them ready and available. Robust, healthy and able bodies as well as optimistic, balanced and rational minds were crucial. The most important tools in this ambitious biopolitical project included statistical knowledge, an effective administrative apparatus, systematic education and, increasingly around the turn of the twentieth century, a system of institutions for improving public health.

The socialist regimes in Eastern Europe did not just embrace this core idea of modernity, but also presented themselves as its poster children.¹⁴ The promise of care not only served to legitimise the socialist regimes towards their citizens; caring for the “vulnerable” citizens also became a key subject in the ideological rivalry between the two world systems.¹⁵

11 Thießen, “Risk as a Resource”; Turkowska, *Der kranke Rand des Reiches*.

12 Bayton, “Disability”; Evans, “Epidemics and Revolutions”. It should be noted that the anti-modern counternarrative romanticizing illness and early death ultimately serves the same concept: Mester, “Literati’s Health and Illness”; Sprecher (ed.), *Literatur und Krankheit im fin-de-siècle*.

13 Sluga, “Bodies, Souls and Sovereignty”; Turkowska, “Im Namen der ‘großen Kolonisationsaufgaben’”; Strobel, “Die Gesundung Russlands”; Karge, “Psychiatrischer Institutionenaufbau”; Steffen, “Experts and the Modernization of the Nation”; Schmidt, “The Politics of Surveillance”; Karge/Bernasconi/Kind-Kovács, (eds.), *From the Midwife’s Bag*; Randák, “Kropící vůz?”.

14 Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses*; Solomon/Hutchinson (eds.), *Health and Society*.

15 Baár, “Disability and Civil Courage”.

Considering socialism a version of modernity in a dynamic and complex relationship with (but not in strict opposition to) capitalism and “the West”¹⁶ opens new perspectives on both disability and modernity. Also, for socialist contemporaries, modernity was first and foremost a promise and dis/ability served as a powerful prosthesis for articulating these promises. For instance, using key topoi of the socialist utopia such as progress and justice, both propagandists and public health professionals built up the image of a new society that would provide every individual not only with the opportunity to stay but also, even more importantly, to *become* healthy and productive. The promises of socialist modernity were reflected in both everyday practice and political symbolism: hygiene, for instance, became more than just a vital routine; it morphed into a symbol of medical, social, political and – most importantly – moral advancement. So did campaigns against malaria, tuberculosis and polio.¹⁷

Socialism promised prevention as well as healing, both of the individual and the entire social body. This fundamentally optimistic approach was applied very generously to all kinds of illnesses, diseases, infections, impairments, and disabilities. Socialist regimes pledged to offer close-knit health systems, including prevention, health education, vaccinations, rehabilitation, rehabilitative technology and sanatoriums, and even when the most ambitious aims of the utopian approach were abandoned after 1953, the commitment to a caring and providing society remained.¹⁸

These promises however also came with demands and requirements made towards the population: health and hygiene can be understood as technologies of the self, and if society was to become healthy and overcome illness and disability, every individual was to contribute to this goal. Posters, brochures and educational films taught people to follow rules of hygiene, get vaccinated, obey doctor’s advice, and – over all – be a healthy, productive and all-round good citizen.¹⁹

The pervasive emphasis on abledness and strategies and measures to achieve and retain it, can be considered part of the arsenal of modern tech-

16 Beilharz, *Socialism and Modernity*; Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity*. A sceptical perspective emerging from the analysis of biopolitics has been provided by Prozorov, “Living Ideas and Dead Bodies”.

17 Vargha, *Polio Across the Iron Curtain*; Braun, “From Landscapes to Labscapes”; Braun, “Schwarzer Tod, rote Hygiene”; Michaels, “Medical Propaganda”.

18 Kolář, *Der Poststalinismus*.

19 Starks, “Propagandizing the Healthy”; Osten, “Socialist Advertising”; Iarskaia-Smirnova, “Heroes and Spongers”.

nologies of governance. Governance is a topic of several chapters in this volume that highlight how socially inclusive politics was structurally linked to discriminating strategies, or – as Sarah Phillips put it – to “the politics of exclusion and social distancing”²⁰. Maria-Lena Faßig’s text *Discourses of Prevention, Risk and Responsibility in the Women’s Magazine Vlasta (1950s–1980s)* specifically addresses how a Czech popular magazine for women intertwined the promises of health (and healthcare) with demands on its citizens. Very quickly, Faßig argues, the diagnosis of social problems turned into accusations directed back at the failing individuals. Socialist women/mothers in particular were faced with specific individualised responsabilisation in relation to disability that ranged and changed through the decades from preventive healthcare and accident prevention to responsible reproductive behaviour and later even genetic testing.

Socialism’s Disability Trouble

The radical attempts to rethink and redefine disability notwithstanding, embodied difference continued to trouble socialist societies. It is this paradoxical position on disability that lends itself particularly well to an analysis of socialist societies in Eastern Europe. The essays gathered in this book thus offer their takes on what it means to think disability as a useful category – to paraphrase Joan Scott’s paradigmatic essay²¹ – when writing the history of state socialism in Eastern Europe. As noted above, disability was a crucial category in formulating and articulating visions of socialism, equality, socialist morality and justice and ultimately socialist visions of utopia. The essays in this volume demonstrate how disability figures as “a constitutive element of social relationships” and as a category that signifies relations of power (and in this sense also intersects, interacts with and accentuates the workings of other relations of power such as gender, class, race, sexuality). And most importantly, in their collective force, the chapters reflect back on the able/d norm that “masquerade[d] as a non-identity”²².

20 Phillips, “There Are No Invalids in the USSR!”. On the subject of exclusion, see also: Završsek, “Those Who Do Not Work Shall Not Eat!”; Walker, “Postcommunist Deinstitutionalization”.

21 Scott, “Gender”.

22 McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 1.

In the individual reflections on these questions, three larger fields come forth most distinctly: politics of knowing and epistemologies of disability (both in expert and popular cultural imaginaries), conditional nature of socialist solidarity and care, and the normative horizons of socialist futurity.

Frustrated Promises of the New Disability Epistemologies

Early representations of socialist societies abounded in light-flooded photographs, propagandist publications, fiction books and films, all of which centred on health in their promise of a better future. To achieve such a goal, not only practical medical help by professionals and an appropriate individual moral and political attitude were required, but also new ethiological perspectives and often fundamentally transformed approaches to illness and disability. Attempts to explain maladies in new ways were particularly prominent in the early years of newly established socialist societies: the significance of heredity was controversially debated and genetics seemed interesting yet problematic.²³ Both scientists and politicians emphasised environmental and social factors, so much more compatible with Marxist philosophy than the fatalistic idea of genetics popular in the Western world in the first half of the twentieth century.

The socialist experts who leant on historical materialism, Marxist philosophy and principles of progressive pedagogy²⁴ strove to formulate new epistemological frameworks that would enable the embodied difference to become incorporated into socialist optimism and utopia. Defectology, the new socialist science of disability, soon became the dominant epistemological framework of disability because, as Maria Galmarini-Kabala explains, it “aligned well with the official rhetoric of triumphant socialism and [...] incorporated new, specific ideological meanings into its long-standing narrative of care”.²⁵

Several chapters in *Re/Imaginations of Disability in State Socialism* document defectology’s influence across the socialist states of Eastern Europe and illustrate how it became a sort of “travelling theory”, morphing in the process of travel and translation and via contact with different contexts and different

23 Solomon, “Infertile Soil”; Kohtz, “Gute Gene, schlechte Gene”.

24 Henschel/Shmidt, “Special Education”, 125.

25 Galmarini-Kabala, “Between Defectological Narratives”, 180.

expert and political practices. Capturing defectology's migration challenges the notion that the defectological paradigm, first developed in the Soviet Union, was simply enforced as part and parcel of the ideological imperialism across the states belonging to the Eastern "bloc" under Soviet influence. To flesh out this point, Marek Fapšo's and Jan Randák's chapter *Work as a Form of Emancipation: the Emergence of Czechoslovak Defectology* maps out defectology's path to establishing itself as an expert discipline of the socialist science in Czechoslovakia in the early 1950s. Teodor Mladenov's *Disability Assessment Under State Socialism* then discusses the translations of Soviet defectology and the system of disability assessment into Bulgaria. Frank Henschel's *The Formation of "Disability": Expert Discourses on Children's Sexuality, "Behavioural Defectivity", and "Bad Families" in Socialist Czechoslovakia (1950s–1970s)* and Kateřina Kolářová's and Filip Herza's *Engineering Socialist Integration in the Age of Normalisation: Roma and People with Disabilities as Objects of Care in Socialist Czechoslovakia* analyse more closely how discourses of defectology were modified and utilised for the purposes of governance.

True to the credo of human plasticity, and to the socialist aspirations to create conditions upon which a new and happier humanity could be formed, socialist defectology proposed a radically different epistemology of disability. In contrast to the previously dominant understandings of bodily, sensory or intellectual variations as pathological deviation hindering a productive and happy life and burdening society, the defectological paradigm shifted the attention from the individual to the collective soma, *and* to the social body. In this way, defectology refused to view disability both as solely written onto the body²⁶ and as permanent. Defectologists introduced a dualist model dividing the organic "defect" (impairment/alterity) from "defectivity" (disability) – the dysfunctional relationship between people with disabilities and the non-disabled society – and proclaimed the latter (and prevention thereof) as *the* focus of their expert attention. This was a radical epistemological move with many political and ideological implications that this volume explores at some length.

However, the defectological model and its uses spotlight the contradictions and tensions in socialist thinking about disability. Despite the proclaimed focus on the larger socio-economic context and emphasis on the ways in which social environments contribute to or even constitute "defectivity", the line supposedly dividing defects from defectivities proved all too

26 See for instance: Sovák, "O nové pojetí defektologie"; Sovák, *Nárys speciální pedagogiky*.

fragile. Defectologists proved to be troubled by “defects” and deeply invested in their “improvement”. Even if for most of the period, socialist defectologists addressed “defectivity” in their theorisations of socialisation (and later integration) of people with disabilities, the fact that socialisation was understood as individual rehabilitation in order to achieve one’s most optimal usefulness for the purposes of socialist society led to even more focus on “defects” and even deeper entrenchment of the abled norms.

The paradoxical effect of such a “functional” view of disability²⁷ was that it produced explicit classifications and implicit hierarchisations of types and forms of “defects” based on their presumed rehabilitability into social usefulness. Hence the socialist overcoming of defects was not ultimately and necessarily linked to a “cure” or restoring physical or sensory norm/alcy. However, defectological efforts to provide optimal plans for rehabilitation and the best classification of “defects” that would single out those who were deemed beyond rehabilitation reveal that “overcoming” defect/ivity produced its own “others” and forms of exclusions.

Unpacking this paradoxical tension between the inclusive promise and the exclusionary effects of the defectological paradigm, Kateřina Kolářová and Filip Herza trace how defectology (and the social studies on Roma) attempted to revive the commitment to care and introduce a new concept of integration. Yet it was as a part of the normative architecture of integration that Czechoslovak defectology also reinforced the category of “social uselessness” and argued that people that fell into this category could be included in the social fibre and were thus to be “segregated”.²⁸ Socialist integration thus legitimises the institutionalisation and marginalisation of disabled people outright, in particular those with intellectual disabilities. The presumed permanence of intellectual and mental disabilities frustrated the modernist visions of the perfectibility of the human subject; they could not be overcome and shaped into “normalcy” and thus intellectual disabilities seem to embody *the* trouble of socialist defectology²⁹.

27 Phillips, “There Are No Invalids in the USSR!”. Phillips rather fittingly names the defectological paradigm a “functional model of disability”.

28 Sovák, *Nárys speciální pedagogiky*, 20.

29 Galmarini-Kabala documents the ultimate double bind of socialist defectology in the approach to people with intellectual disabilities: the stories of the intellectually disabled children “neither revealed any overcoming of impairment nor suggested the presence of a benevolent state that cared for its most vulnerable subjects”. Galmarini-Kabala, “Between Defectological Narratives”, 182.

In sum, the expert epistemologies of disability served to establish and reinforce novel visions of social relations promising to incorporate previously ostracised social groups, particularly people with disabilities. At the same time, expert knowledge provided an ideological support for the moral economy of productive labour that then served punitive measures and effectively lead to new forms of social marginalisation rooted in notions of “uselessness” or “parasitism”. Furthermore, the original emancipatory impulse that defectology offered with its the focus on disability as socially produced turned into a tool of policing and expressly punitive governance. Frank Henschel’s analysis illustrates how the discourse and classification categories of defectology provided a tool of biopolitical regulation directed at adolescents’ – and particularly young women’s – sexuality. Henschel’s text also argues that and lays out how in the 1960s defectology retreated from analysing the social body and the larger social contexts of “defects” and consequently reinforced the individualised understandings of defect/ivity.

Work and Overcome Defects!

As we have pointed out in our brief outline, productivity, work and contributions to the collective effort of building socialist society became a key element of the moral economy of state socialist societies. Contributing one’s labour was understood as a precondition for socialist citizenship and the citizen’s part in fulfilling the social contract of socialist society. So how, as several chapters in the book ask, did a society whose legitimacy was founded on the high value of work manage to include people who were unable to fulfil the norm? How did the moral economy structured around the concept of “usefulness”³⁰ function in theories of disability and in relation to people whose bodies had previously been seen as a handicap to productive life?

The socialist concept of rehabilitation saw one’s contribution to the labour force not only as a moral responsibility but also as a way of overcoming defectivity and “normalising” relationships between the disabled subject and the “collective of normal people”.³¹ Acquiring work competencies was believed to compensate for a defect and to rehabilitate defectivity. Normal/ised relationships between the disabled and non-disabled people, Fapšo

30 Phillips, “There Are No Invalids in the USSR”.

31 Sovák, “O nové pojetí defektologie”, 241.

and Randák summarise, “are relations into which a person grows through upbringing and education and which he or she maintains through work”.

Teodor Mladenov’s chapter underscores the ways in which work was invoked as a social binding force in early socialist Bulgaria. People with disabilities were assigned to “‘invalidity groups’ associated with specific measures for labour (re)integration”, echoing the USSR work policies in which assessment of disability shifted from the *lost* capacity to determining the *remaining* capacity to work.³² Work and one’s contributing labour thus functioned as a symbolic platform through which disabled people were seen to “overcome” their defects and become “useful” members of the socialist societies. In this sense, the normative outlines for disabled individual subjectivity paralleled/resembled the norms for the able-bodied citizens of the socialist states. Furthermore, as Mladenov also argues, work (and disability assessment) “generated effects in the domain of cultural recognition which concern[ed] disabled and non-disabled people alike, including identity construction and reification of status hierarchies.”

Interestingly, framing labour as a normalising tool of disability/defectivity produced its own version of disability exceptionalism: in the inspirational stories heroising disabled people as model socialist citizens outperforming able-bodied workers. Later, in the thralls of technical revolution and socialist techno-optimism, experts often looked to disabled people, typically neuro-divergent people whom they imagined better equipped for communication with computers and new technologies.

Work has been established as a condition for (abled) normalcy beyond the realm of the socialist states. In the modern and industrialised Western societies, compulsory ablebodiedness was tied to one’s ability to sell or commodify one’s labour.³³ The socialist version of compulsory ablebodiedness then seems to have been defined by one’s ability to contribute to and exchange labour for participation in the construction of socialist society. As the debates over defect/ivity indicate, this norm was not defined through monetary self-commodification but through – compulsory and punitively enforced – investment in the collective effort.

The push and pull between the socialist “right to be helped”³⁴ that was seen as one of the principles setting the socialist regimes apart from the exploitative charity of bourgeois states and the imperative of useful labour is

³² Fieseler, “The Bitter Legacy”, 47.

³³ McRuer, *Crip Theory*

³⁴ Galmarini-Kabala, *The Right to Be Helped*.

at the heart of Pia Schmäuser's discussion of parenthood of disabled children in the GDR. In her chapter "*We as parents must be helped.*" *State-parent interactions concerning the use of care facilities for children with "mental disabilities" in the GDR*, Schmäuser not only maps the insufficiency of the state support offered to the parents of children with disabilities – a lack that often led the parents to demand institutionalisation of their children because they were unable to continue to provide the care themselves – Schmäuser also highlights how parents seeking help from the state shaped their arguments in line with the elements of socialist propaganda: social justice, effectivity in the organisation of labour and a functioning bureaucracy of care. In addition, it becomes clear how parents strategically utilised the moral imperative to employment and work to push the state to uphold its responsibility and moral obligation to provide care to its citizens.

Disability Prosthesis and Negotiating Socialist Imaginaries

Cultural representations of disability, as another form of epistemological production, simultaneously construe horizons of normalcy and offer space to renegotiate visions of socialism. Narratives of disability thus capture well the dynamic that organises the book as a whole: the tensions and drive of visions, promises and their frustrations. Cultural representations and politics are the subject of Martina Winkler's, Natalia Pamula's and Maria-Lena Faßig's chapters.

Winkler's chapter *Disability and Childhood in Socialist Czechoslovakia* maps the shifts and changes in disability representations across several decades of state socialism in Czechoslovakia. She opens by laying out how narrative representations of disabled children (and intersections of childhood and disability) serve to articulate and communicate visions of happiness and better futures where overcoming disability represents overcoming social divisions and forms of isolation.

However, as early revolutionary optimism yielded to sceptical approaches toward modernity in general, disability narratives also proved very useful for negotiating frustrations and challenges to socialism. In particular, literature and the arts became important fields for reflection on and critique and disapproval of unilinear conceptions of modernity. Winkler's and Pamula's chapters highlight how cultural imaginaries of disability can serve

as another way of exploring the frustrations to the socialist revolutionary optimism and the ways in which the contours of socialist society and its future directions needed to be reimaged and renegotiated. Or as Winkler observes, disability reflects on the “ambiguous relationship of the emancipatory and the oppressive” elements of the socialist regime.

Natalia Pamula’s chapter – *Out of Place, Out of Time: Intellectual Disability in Late Socialist Polish Young Adult Literature* – dramatises how disability served to narrate moments of ideological crises. Focusing on young adult literature specifically directed at young girls and women, Pamula explores how narratives featuring children with intellectual disabilities allow to express frustrations at the promises of socialism falling flat. While children with intellectual disabilities are ultimately pictured as the ultimate and abject “other” of the socialist modern urbanity, or “out of place and out of time”, they simultaneously become a useful tool with which to critique the (lack of) progress of Polish socialist modernity. Furthermore, Pamula shows how the failure of the Polish state and society to provide care and education to disabled children translate into gendered interpellation of young Polish women to actively participate in – indeed, to take on – the civilising mission of the Polish countryside in order to revive the promise of socialist modernity.

The juxtaposition of Winkler’s and Pamula’s texts foregrounds both the incredible flexibility of disability metaphors and the varied ways in which disability can be turned into a prosthesis through which differing narratives of socialism and differing moral dictums were articulated. Both texts illustrate how disability metaphors – especially those of overcoming, healing and curing – provide affective power and legitimisation to visions of socialist society as society overcoming and healing social divisions and structural injustices of the past, or to narratives offering visions of the socialist society steering itself out of the political conflicts and finding healthy stability and “normalcy”.

At the same time, metaphors of disability serve as an equally affectively powerful vehicle for criticising the failures of the promises of social welfare and modernist progress. In fact, disability metaphors might have been the politically acceptable and legitimate prosthesis for expressing such critiques. Representations and metaphors of disability disrupt and can thus serve to critique social ills such as the exclusion and marginalisation of disabled peo-

ple and other social groups, or express more expansive critiques of socialism per se.³⁵

Importantly, this contrast between the ways of prothesising disability, both as a metaphor of the promises and optimistic visions and as a metaphor to articulate critique and frustration with state socialism captures the very conflict that lies at the heart of the socialist project vis-à-vis disability: the utopian promise to embrace disability and turn disabled people into “socialist subjects” also means that the difference of disability must be annulled, either by rehabilitation or by the normalizing power of work, or by its disappearance. Pamula documents that children with intellectual disabilities are not only turned into the narrative device with which to articulate frustrations with Polish (late) socialism. More importantly, her analysis demonstrates that the collective social imagination of the socialist societies could not accommodate difference that resisted the imperative to be cured, rehabilitated and overcome.

“Frustrations” are certainly not the same as “failure”. Traditional binary perspectives of success versus failure or total power versus political weakness have been criticised for some time now.³⁶ The various ways in which politicians, experts and citizens in socialist states react to systemic shortcomings and weaknesses of the health system support such criticism: questions were raised, problems were pointed out, while solutions seemed available only sometimes. It has proven fruitful and compelling to consider such criticism as part and parcel of the socialist discourse rather than as attempts to resist or even abandon the system’s patterns and logic.³⁷ Expressions of frustration thus amalgamated with the original visions and the rhetoric of promises. Ultimately, the essays in this volume explore what new analytical perspectives we might gain on socialist societies by making disability the centre our perspective. Furthermore, we hope to contribute to disability history by providing insights into disability policies and conceptions that appear very different at first sight but might prove to be less alien than expected.

Disability, as these chapters argue, likewise provides a new angle for studying frustrations of socialism. Most clearly, the moments of tension that this volume highlights through its analysis of disability discourses is the deep trouble with difference and the deep chasm between the (proclaimed) desire

35 Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century*.

36 The pitfalls of such binaries have been discussed by Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever* and recently by Lehmann/Oberländer, “Introduction”.

37 Vargha, “Socialist Utopia in Practice”.

for and promises of justice and equality and the rigid notions of normalcy, and ablebodiedness or ablemindedness. Coming full circle, we end this introduction by pointing back to its opening – to neglect these inherent paradoxes and tensions would mean reducing the history of disability under state socialism to stories of oppression, stigma and state violence.

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“Just Like It Is at Home!” Soviet Deafness and Socialist Internationalism during the Cold War¹

Claire Shaw

On October 15, 1968, the first International Symposium of Societies and Unions of the Deaf of Socialist Countries opened in Moscow. In the grandiose surroundings of the October Hall in the House of Unions, deaf activists from Bulgaria, the GDR, Hungary, Mongolia, Poland, the USSR and Yugoslavia joined Soviet government representatives to discuss the position of deaf citizens in their respective countries. Over the course of five days, these representatives shared experiences and discussed the “supremely humane task” facing their organisations: to ensure social support, labour rehabilitation and integration into everyday life for all deaf people. In an account of the symposium in the deaf-produced Soviet magazine *Zhizn' glukhikh* (*Life of the Deaf*), the conclusions to be drawn from this event were made clear:

“The positive social and economic conditions created in socialist countries for those lacking hearing and speech allows societies and unions of the deaf, with the help of state organs, to successfully solve the question of the general and professional education of deaf people, their job prospects, everyday life, and cultural provision, and as a result to ensure the all-round development of the deaf personality, and the communist education of those who cannot hear.”²

This concerted attempt to define and celebrate what it meant to be a deaf person in the socialist world formed part of a longer history of Soviet deaf relations with the socialist bloc and beyond. Following the Second World War, the sovietisation of Eastern Europe and the beginnings of the Cold

1 I am extremely grateful to Zbigniew Wojnowski, Martina Winkler, Kateřina Kolářová, and the participants of the “Disability in Socialist Societies” workshop for their comments on this chapter.

2 “O provedenii Mezhdunarodnogo simpoziuma obshchestvo i soizov glukhikh sotsialisticheskikh stran 15–19. X goda v Moskve”, 17.

War conflict saw the building of increased links between deaf people in the Soviet Union and in Central and Eastern Europe, both on an institutional level – through bilateral and multilateral meetings between societies and unions of deaf people – and on an informal, grassroots level, as groups of deaf people travelled across the socialist bloc and met others who could not hear. These contacts were seen by Soviet deaf activists to confirm an affinity of experience and identity between socialist deaf people, who viewed one another's lives and joyfully exclaimed, as one magazine article put it, "That's just like it is at home!"³

The International Symposium thus represented the culmination of an attempt by Soviet deaf activists to recognise and foster a distinct type of deaf person, one who was brought to life by the socialist context, and who embodied its opportunities. The notion of a distinct form of "socialist deafness", while never formally codified, emerges strongly in Soviet accounts of the symposium. It functioned on three levels: the experiential, the institutional, and the ideological. Socialist deafness was defined in terms of the experiential and sensory characteristics of the deaf community, including a shared visual culture, the use of sign language, and the familiar and intimate structures of their community. These experiences were enabled by a common institutional structure, including a centralised, deaf-run organisation, usually housed within the structures of government, which provided education, access to healthcare and technology, communal spaces, cultural facilities, and the material and organisational support that enabled deaf people to succeed in work and in their personal lives. Finally, these structures were understood in strongly ideological terms, as the inevitable result of the egalitarian and humanist nature of the socialist project, which enabled all people, regardless of their physical condition, to lead "full-blooded lives".⁴ These levels were understood to be intimately intertwined, and with deafness viewed as a cultural identity that could never be lived in such an ideal way as under socialism. As such, the International Symposium represented the bringing together of these three levels, attempting to shape a community of people who felt "at home" in the commonality of their ideological, institutional, and sensory identity.

3 Abramov, "Pod zvezdami balkanskimi", 22.

4 See State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. A-511, op. 1, d. 489, l. 64. On "socialist humanism" see: Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*, 25, and Fapšo/Randák and Kolářová/Herza in this volume.

Yet at the same time, the Symposium revealed the complexities inherent in this project. The notion of “home” shaped by transnational deaf connections in the socialist bloc was both complex and tenuous. The Symposium took place a mere two months after Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia, crushing the nascent socialist reform movement known as the Prague Spring (a fact that had certainly not been anticipated by the Symposium’s organisers). As Rachel Applebaum has suggested, the image of tanks on the streets of Prague became emblematic of the problematic nature of transnational connections in Central and Eastern Europe, which “revealed political and cultural differences that undermined the larger goal of creating political cohesion in the Communist bloc.”⁵ The Symposium was not immune from these tensions, with propagandistic statements about the “unanimous” agreement between socialist bloc states failing to mask differences of opinion, alternative practices, and the awkward – if scarcely mentioned – absence of deaf representatives from Czechoslovakia.⁶ Yet the discussions of warm friendships among deaf attendees, cemented during evening visits to deaf clubs and enterprises and a two-day trip to Leningrad, hinted at the emotional commonalities fostered by the Symposium, in which the official programme seemed secondary to the everyday pleasures of a week in the company of other socialist deaf people.⁷ The interweaving of official ideology and intimate encounter reveal both the complexities inherent in the socialist deafness project, and the potentially different meanings with which it could be invested by Soviet deaf people and their counterparts across the socialist bloc.

The notion of socialist deafness was not simply about the internal politics of the bloc, however. As the title of the International Symposium suggests, the Soviet attempt to foster a common identity for socialist deaf people represented an internationalist ambition; an attempt to shape a lived reality, and through it a form of soft diplomacy, that would speak to the whole world. The connection between deaf identity and the Soviet Union’s internationalist policy during the Cold War was made abundantly clear by N. N. L’iashko,

5 Applebaum, *Empire of Friends*, 11.

6 It is not clear from the sources why Czechoslovak representatives did not attend the Symposium. The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic had confirmed their attendance on 1st July 1968, and plans were already in place for further official exchanges between Czechoslovak and Soviet deaf activists in 1969 and 1970. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), fond A-511, opis 1, delo 1650, list 4.

7 See, for example: Il’in, “Leningrad prinimaet gostei”, 16.