

Call for Papers

Processing Perestroika: Making Sense and Making Do

Georgetown University, Washington DC, March 7–8, 2025

Much of the backlash against neoliberalism and democracy in Russia and across the former socialist world is rooted in narratives of grievance about the period of “transition,” or what we call the “Long Perestroika” (1985–2000). Politicians, activists and thinkers from across the political spectrum often point to missteps and roads not taken at the end of state socialism as key to understanding the current moment. But what did that time look and feel like to those living it? How did late- and post-socialist subjects navigate, negotiate and comprehend the changing worlds around them? This conference will focus on the lived experience of the long perestroika and the impact of political and economic upheaval on real-time cultural production.

Scholarship on the culture of the era has often focused on the lifting of censorship and new freedoms, as previously banned literature was widely read and new cultural forms flooded in. But two complementary phenomena—instability and fragmentation—were no less important for cultural development.

Though instability varied across the socialist world, social upheaval—from peaceful change to violent conflict—characterized broad swaths of Central and East Europe and Eurasia for much of the era. How did artists, cultural creators, and everyday citizens make sense of the seismic changes taking place around them even as they scrambled to cope or even take advantage of economic and political disarray? How did the demands of an increasingly unstable everyday existence affect subjects’ abilities to make sense of and aesthetically represent the world around them? What new forms—institutional, artistic, interpersonal—did they create? What functions of art and culture dominated and what aspects atrophied as ideological strictures faded and market incentives arose?

The culture of the “Long Perestroika” is no less characterized by the fragmentation of the cultural landscape. Where Soviet culture was centrally controlled, the flood of new voices unleashed by Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of *glasnost* could not be contained. Long before the official end of state socialism, institutions began to diverge from the Party line, sometimes ceding control or succumbing to market demands. As censorship and ideological strictures gave way, centralized distribution also atrophied, and the media and cultural production of one city or region might never connect with audiences elsewhere. How did the fragmentation of the cultural landscape change what was represented and how? How did the emptying out or capture of cultural institutions stymie or facilitate cultural production? And what can we learn from this moment of fragmentation that might be useful for decentering (or “decolonizing”) the study of our region today?

We invite papers that look at how the “Long Perestroika” was experienced, understood, and represented by the people living it across the former socialist space. Our goal is to consider both strategies for survival and the forms of representation such strategies engendered. We especially encourage contributions that consider the impact of instability and fragmentation in the cultural landscape in the shaping of real time representations of perestroika.

This conference will be conducted as a workshop. Draft papers will be circulated a month in advance. The meeting will consist of brief presentations, followed by considerable time for discussion.

This conference is the second in a series under the aegis of the European Research Council grant *Perestroika from Below* and is supported by a Georgetown University Faculty Global Engagement Grant. The first, “Re-constructing Perestroika,” was organized in collaboration with the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague in March 2024. A third conference, “Appropriating Perestroika,” will be hosted by the ZZF in Potsdam in 2026.

Proposals of no more than 500 words accompanied by a one-page CV should be sent to Kathleen Smith (kes8@georgetown.edu) by 1 October 2024. Notifications of acceptance will be sent out by the first week of December.

The conference will be held at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, on March 7 and 8, 2025.

Travel and lodging for participants will be subsidized.

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