

2020

H-Diplo

Conference Report (CR-2020-1)
14 December 2020

Updated 15 January 2021 to correct the following:

-Page 2- Changed "As O'Connell elaborated" to "As Phillips elaborated"

-Page 2- Sentence beginning with "Whilst the Bundeshaus..." rewritten; now begins with "Whilst on public places in East Berlin..."

Conflict and the Senses in the Global Cold War: From Propaganda to Sensory Warfare

Berlin Center for Cold War Studies of the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ)
in cooperation the Centre for Digital and Contemporary History (C²DH) of Université du Luxembourg,
the Stiftung Ernst-Reuter-Archiv Berlin, and the Stiftung Luftbrückendank

Date: Oct. 13–16, 2020; Place: -online -

<https://hdiplo.org/to/CR-2020-1>

Report by **Bodo Mrozek**, Centre for Digital and Contemporary History (C2DH), Université du Luxembourg / Berlin Center for Cold War Studies (BKKK)

Although the Cold War was a conflict in which military strategies and weapons of mass destruction were always on the "horizon of expectation," it was to a large degree carried out by nonlethal methods. It was also a war of (material) culture, and (visual and sonic) propaganda. On the basis of this working hypothesis, the international workshop regarded the longest conflict of the twentieth century as a war not only against the senses, but through the senses.

In his keynote address (Video online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5ofwSV24_Y), Mark M. Smith (Columbia) argued that sensory history should be connected to the history of emotions. Taking up the term "cold," the distinguished American sensory historian read this crucial (and thermoreceptive) marker for the era as both tactile and emotional. He addressed fear as a central emotion of the Cold War, caused by olfactory stimuli, and examined the experience of taste caught between the emotional poles of disgust and happiness. Finally, he identified emotions as the very aim of different forms of propaganda.

Several papers made these connections as well, including those presented in the first panel, which was devoted to the intersensory approaches that sensory studies scholars have recently been calling for to expand the boom of visual history and sound studies to include other modes of perception such as the "close senses" of touch, taste, and smell, and "new senses" such as hunger or pain. Adopting the global approach of the workshop, Cyril Cordoba (Lausanne) analyzed the experience of Swiss travelers who were officially invited to China in the 1960s and 1970s. In their documents he found various descriptions of a "sensory overload." Through a close reading of these reports—and a close listening to taped recordings—Cordoba detected different "layers of sound," including street orchestras, the echoes of demonstrations in the background, and moments of "awkward silences and nervous laughs" in cross-cultural communication. Such sensory experiences became political when the travelers began to organize public presentations back in Switzerland.

By analyzing the sensory environment of young draftees in East and West Germany after the remilitarization of the divided country, Carsten Richter (Berlin) brought an intersensorial approach to military history. During the daily life in the barracks—"a painful full-body experience" in which soldiers sensed hunger and thirst, were exposed to bad odors, and tasted low-quality food—many soldiers turned to alcohol and became an easy target for propaganda. The counterpropaganda division of the West German military targeted East German soldiers with visual materials designed to look exactly like official East German media. The goal was to keep this target group from getting caught while viewing it.

Military propaganda was also the focus of the paper by José Manuel López Torán (Castilla-La Mancha) on the perception of the Cold War in Francoist Spain. He examined the state-controlled cinema newsreel NO-DO (“News and Documentaries”) not only through the eyes and ears of the audiences from the period, but also through their noses. The volume, darkness, and “distinctive smell” of the projection rooms formed an immersive experience in which news about the wars in Korea or Vietnam induced “fear, anguish, sadness,” and other intense feelings. Studying the techniques of propaganda films, Cordoba described how the “senses were the ammunition to evoke and manipulate emotions.”

The panel on taste was opened by Kaete O’Connell (Dallas), who presented the paper “Food Fights in Divided Germany.” During the Berlin Airlift in the late 1940s, in the operation “Little Vittles,” taste products that had no significant nutritional value (like chewing gum) became a “gastrodiplomatic measure,” as O’Connell put it. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles regarded this strategy as a form of psychological warfare. By 1954, such food operations were expanded to include the eastern sector of Berlin and Eastern European states, as Victoria Phillips (New York) added. In Berlin, Dulles’ sister Eleanor Lansing Dulles oversaw the delivery of “Eisenhower packages” consisting of cigarettes, crackers, instant coffee, powdered milk, cookies, and chocolate fudge. A crucial factor was not only taste, but also color. As Phillips elaborated, “selling with color” was a concept developed by the ad men involved in the American psychwar tactics.

Colors were also a subject addressed by the panel on the cultural politics of the Cold War. Joshua Simon (New York) identified the “smooth curves, monochromatic surfaces, flawless straight lines, clear cuts, and shiny aluminum” of modernist styles in art and design as signifiers of (Western) Cold War modernism. Investigating the exhibition practices of the Museum of Modern Art, he found that, in its design exhibitions, haptic material remnants of war technology, like synthetic rubber and aluminum, were presented as “a continuation of warfare in a different form.”

On the other side of the Iron Curtain, Western modernism in the arts led to political conflict. Raphaëlle Auclert (La Roche sur Yon) took a look at the 1974 art event in Moscow that gained notoriety as the “Bulldozer Exhibition.” Western abstract painters exerted a strong influence on Soviet artists such as Oscar Rabin, and when these artists presented their work at the exhibition, the secret police ordered their destruction by bulldozers. Addressing the visual qualities of these paintings, Auclert positioned this spectacular event within the “chromatic war” of the period.

The politicization of vision can also be found in the Panorama book series, which was discussed by the photographer Michael Wesely (Berlin) and the curator Paul Wombell (London). The series created by former Nazi-publisher Wilhelm Andermann portrayed European cities in color and contributed to the subtle visual partition of Europe by focusing almost entirely on Western Europe. Culminating in a compilation with the martial title *Immortal Europe*, the series created “a visual Iron Curtain that split the continent into two”—with images of a superior West making the East invisible.

Visual partitioning was also the topic of the paper by Philipp Nielsen (New York) on the “built view” in East Berlin and Bonn, which took a sensory approach to the analysis of government architecture. Whilst on public places in East-Berlin, passersby were incorporated into the masses, at the Bundeshaus in the West German capital of Bonn the individual became visible. Planners in both German states chose the symbolic transparency of glass facades, but ironically, East German leaders remained invisible behind the facade of the *Palast der Republik* in East Berlin.

Opening the panel on smell, Stephanie Weismann (Vienna) followed the volatile trail of the politicization of Polish perfumery. The socialist fight for a new society with new hygienic standards came with a deodorization of everyday life. As a result, the strong scents in Soviet perfumes such as Red Moscow were perceived as rather unpleasant. The perfume Pani Walewska, whose iconic blue flacon recalled the French brand Soir de Paris, became a substitute for now unattainable French perfumes. The founder of the brand Inter-Fragrances became one of the first Polish millionaires to play a key role in the transformation of the socialist republic into a market economy.

Odors were also a factor in warfare, as Christy Spackman (Tempe) demonstrated. She focused on the “people sniffer,” a device developed during the Vietnam War to detect the enemy by electronically measuring smell molecules in the air. Citing military reports, Spackman reported its effectiveness in the field remained doubtful. However, army strategists found a new

H-Diplo Conference Reports and Reviews

use for the device in their propaganda war: they declassified the secret weapon and in presentations to the US media pretended they were in possession of superior military technology in an attempt to convince the increasingly war-weary American public to continue supporting the inglorious war.

In his paper on smell conflicts at the inner German border, Bodo Mrozek (Luxembourg) also discussed measures of olfactory warfare. Combining approaches from the disciplines of border and sensory studies, he examined the conflicts that emerged when bad odors wafted across the Berlin Wall. Many smells came from the excessive use of weed killers on the “death strip” along the border. After local media reported on events, various authorities and even diplomatic offices got involved. Not only did smells make border networks permeable, but they also had the ability to act as “accelerants to political conflict.”

Covert conflicts and fringe science were at the center of the panel on torture, drugs, and “mind control” in Cold War intelligence. Pavel Vasilyev and Anastasia Chirkova (St. Petersburg) presented research on the “socialist pharmapolitics” and discussed clinical experiments with Meldonium, a drug that the Soviet Union began testing in the 1970s. During the Soviet-Afghan war, the military developed a strategic interest in the “miracle drug for the Soviet superhuman.” By analyzing the clinical trials conducted in laboratories, Chirkova and Vasilyev were able to trace the various ways the drug was tested for the military, medicine, and, finally, athletic doping.

The two papers dealing with human experiments in the West began with the CIA’s ominous MKULTRA project. Its aim was to “brainwash” agents into carrying out various orders, including assassination, after being activated by a code word. Walter E. Grunden (Bowling Green) described the details of experiments with LSD, hypnosis, and sensory deprivation. The human “material” of the experiments consisted of psychiatric patients, secretaries, and sometimes fellow agents who were drugged without their knowledge. However, instead of creating useful “zombies,” the experiments left some of their “human guinea pigs” in a “zombified” mental state for the rest of their lives, Grunden explained.

Marcel Streng (Düsseldorf) focused on one particular measure of the MKULTRA program—sensory deprivation. During the 1970s, in the CIA’s “psychonauts” program, this became a key tool to self-regulate brain activities on the basis of biocybernetic assumptions. In a dark saltwater tank, the subject should be blocked from external sensations such as thermoreception, vision, hearing, and even gravity. Streng traced the genealogy of such experiments up to the “relaxation practices” of the 1980s, when the former brainwashing measure was revived under the term “floating,” this time as a cure for stress.

In a panel titled “Listening in Times of Conflict,” Alexander Gogun (Berlin) listened to the voices of Soviet leaders such as Stalin, who conveyed hidden messages to audiences by, for example, incorporating the lyrics of military songs into speeches. In the same period, at the water border between China and Taiwan, gigantic speaker towers were erected as “frontline tools,” as Dayton Lekner (British Columbia) explained. This sound warfare ultimately became a kind of psychological war in which the voices of the relatives, who were still living on mainland China, were recorded and transmitted over the water barrier.

A mixture of music and propaganda was also a key tool in the radio wars in Europe. Among the Western stations, Radio Free Europe played a central role in efforts to develop “a pro-Western, pro-American, anti-communist cultural canon.” Andreea Deciu Ritivoi (Pittsburgh) examined the efforts by this US-financed station on German soil to target Central Eastern Europe, especially Hungary. Developing what Ritivoi described as an “acousmatic voice,” Radio Free Europe sounded “more cosmopolitan than local and was eloquent in a classical, bourgeois sense.”

Subtle methods were also used in Berlin’s early Cold War telephony. Mark Fenemore (Manchester) followed the life of Wolfgang, a young German who was hired by the British military in Berlin in the early 1950s. More of an amateur spy than a professional, Wolfgang “pretexted” female phone operators and managed to get engaged with several of them at the same time before he was caught by the Stasi. Combining surveillance and gender studies, Fenemore depicted his protagonist as a predecessor to today’s hackers and as a tragic romantic figure caught in a conflict in which not only sensory, but also sensual encounters were politicized.

H-Diplo Conference Reports and Reviews

In the concluding discussion, participants discussed differing degrees of sensory weaponization during the Cold War, from seduction, disorientation, and the everyday micropolitics of partition to forced propaganda and (covert and overt) warfare in the hot conflicts of the period. While addressing very different levels of conflict and a variety of sensoria, all papers had one thing in common: a focus on the politicization of the senses and the sensorialization of politics in a period of global conflict.

(Conference reports in German and French will be linked at the workshop website

<https://www.berlinerkolleg.com/de/conflict-and-senses-global-cold-war-propaganda-sensory-warfare>)

Program

1. Bodo Mrozek (Luxembourg/Berlin): The Global Cold War and the Senses (Introduction)

2. Keynote by Mark M. Smith (Columbia): Redux: Time, Desire, Horror ([Video](#))

I. Warfare through the Body: Intersensory Perceptions

Chair: Bodo Mrozek

3. Cyril Cordoba (Lausanne): “Bring China Home”: Sensory Experiences of Maoist Propaganda, 1964–1978

4. Carsten Richter (Berlin): To Inform and Deceive: Sensory Approaches in Military Propaganda in Cold War Germany

5. José Manuel López Torán (Castilla-La Mancha): From Korea to Cuba: NO-DO as Sonic and Visual Propaganda of the Cold War in Francoist Spain

II. A Taste of the Other: Incorporating Cold War through Food

Chair: Viktoria von Hoffmann (Liège)

1. Kaete O’Connell (Dallas): Hearts, Minds, and Stomachs: Food Fights in Divided Germany

2. Victoria Phillips (New York): Seeing, Hearing, Tasting Revolt: Balloons, Radio, and Food for East Germany, 1953

III. Weapons of Touch: Objects and Surfaces in Art and Design

3. Joshua Simon (Philadelphia): High Modernism in Art and Design as Anti-Communism

Chair: Jan Plamper (London)

4. Raphaëlle Auclert (La Roche-sur-Yon): Sense Twenty: Smashing the Art at the Crest of the Cold War

IV. Images of Competition: Envisioning Political Difference

5. Paul Wombell (London) and Michael Wesely (Berlin): Panorama Books: Geopolitics, Propaganda, and Photography

6. Philipp Nielsen (New York): The “Built View” in East and West Germany: How to See Socialism and Democracy in Urban Spaces

H-Diplo Conference Reports and Reviews

V. Smelling Conflict: Scents of the Cold War

Chair: Érika Wicky (Lyon)

1. Stephanie Weismann (Vienna): Olfactory Frontlines between “Soir de Paris” and “Red Moscow”: Polish Perfumery Positioning
2. Christy Spackman (Tempe): Sniffing the Unseen Masses: Charismatic Chemical Detection Abroad and at Home during the Vietnam War
3. Bodo Mrozek (Luxembourg/Berlin): The Smell of the Berlin Wall: Olfactory Warfare at the Border and Transnational Smell Conflicts

VI. Brain Washing, Torture, Drugs, and Mind Control: Sensory Deprivation Experiments

Chair: Robert Jütte (Stuttgart)

4. Pavel Vasilyev, Anastasia Chirkova (St. Petersburg): A Miracle Drug for the Soviet Superhuman: Inquiring into the Early History of Meldonium
5. Walter E. Grunden (Bowling Green): MKULTRA and the Making of an American Zombie: CIA Human Experimentation in Hypnosis, Hallucinogens, Sensory Deprivation, and Mind Control
6. Marcel Streng (Düsseldorf): From Cold War Science to Salt Water Therapy: “Floating,” Brain Stimulation, and “Sensory Deprivation” since the early 1950s

VII. Listening in Times of Conflict: Speeches, Phone Calls, Radio

Chair: Daniel Morat (Berlin)

1. Dayton Lekner (Vancouver): One China—Two Speakers: Hearing Yourself and Your Enemy in Cold War China
2. Alexander Gogun (Berlin): Voices of the Apocalypse: The Speeches of the Leaders of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Songs in 1946–53 as a Harbinger of World War III
3. Andreea Deciu Ritivoi (Pittsburgh): The Voice of the Proxy: Political Exiles and American Democracy
4. Mark Fenemore (Manchester): Sensual Sirens: Gendering Berlin’s Cold War Telephony
5. Final discussion