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The Soviet 'Nuremberg': Forging the Postwar World Beyond the Iron Curtain, 1945-1953'. Research Project

The war crimes trials of the defeated Nazi leadership and their subordinates, synonymous with Nuremberg (although not confined to that city), could be considered a foundation-stone of the modern Western order. These trials established international laws and practices now taken for granted, not least the notion of judicial redress for state crimes. Moreover, they were a symbolic and consciously didactic transitional process from war into peace, reasserting the rule of law and interpreting the reasons for its earlier suspension. Despite their undeniable importance, however, we still know only half the story: the trials of German soldiers and civilians conducted under Soviet authority, both in cooperation with the other victors at Nuremberg itself (the trials of the 'major war criminals') and thereafter autonomously in the nascent East Germany (then the Soviet Occupied Zone, SBZ), have received almost no attention from scholars. Yet the Soviet trial narrative was no less foundational for the world east of the Iron Curtain.

This project will examine the construction of that narrative, and how it was received and responded to by both Soviet public and German citizens in the SBZ. In doing so, it will contribute a comparative study of the establishment of the postwar order in eastern Europe that takes developing, contemporary interpretations of war, militarism, 'civilisation' and peace as seriously as they have been in studies of western Europe. These issues all helped to shape the initial trajectory of international politics and eastern European societies thereafter, but they have generally been neglected in the comparative literature on communist regimes, which has been more concerned with issues of 'totalitarianism', support and resistance.

As in the West, an essential function of the trials was their didactic value; they therefore provide an effective vector by which to examine the official imposition of a new status quo in all spheres of political, economic and social life. Accordingly, in order to understand the significance and meaning of these changes in practice, we must assess how those lessons were received. My DPhil highlighted how official narratives can always be reinterpreted, and I shall use that experience of studying popular 'reclamations' of ideology to examine how ordinary citizens understood, shared, and potentially appropriated official narratives of the postwar moment to better reflect and interpret their own experiences. Moreover, due to the risk entailed by openly communicating confusion, doubts and criticisms (the key mechanisms of interpretation and adaptation to new societal norms), we can begin to trace the principal relational structures – the 'trust groups' which I examined in my previous research – that were developing after the destruction and vicissitudes of war. Of course, broader, more wide-ranging social ties certainly evolved over time as the new political and social norms stabilised and citizens acclimatised to them; to use Bourdieu's term, new 'habitus' were forming in the rubble-strewn aftermath of war. It is the aim of my project to examine these habitus and how they developed: in short, what were postwar society and its social structures and how did they emerge East of the Iron Curtain?

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