



Recent Historiographical Trends in Scholarship on Disability and Socialism in Eastern Europe

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REVIEW ARTICLE



ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to outline recent trends in historical research on disability during state socialism in Eastern Europe. In doing so, it explores how an emerging generation of historians have investigated various aspects of disability in Eastern Europe before 1989 and raises the question of whether there was a distinct experience of disability under state socialism. Drawing on studies published in English and German, the paper traces both Soviet discourses and practices after 1917 and Central and Eastern European trajectories after 1945. It argues that disability policies and expert discourses were informed by a productivist logic as a governing strategy to increase work capacity and to integrate the disabled into socialist society. The paper concludes by discussing the need for a transnational, comparative approach for conceptualising how disability was construed during communism in Eastern Europe.

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Until recently, the topic of disability has been largely neglected by scholars working on Eastern European history. During the Cold War, there was limited access as well as a lack of interest both within and outside of Eastern European countries to carry out research on marginalised groups of society. As Carol Poore (2007) wrote with regard to disability in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), historians faced major methodological hindrances when writing about disability in state socialism, where disabled people could not express their views publicly without being subjected to censorship. In the East, medical discourses dominated much of the research on disability before 1989 and promoted a medical gaze, which generally conceptualised disability as a deficit. Soviet *defectology*, discussed later in this text, served as an influential paradigm which was adopted by most state socialist countries in Eastern Europe after 1945.

One of the few critical accounts written before the collapse of communism was a multi-authored volume edited by McCagg and Siegelbaum (1989). The authors managed to condense various experiences of disability in the Soviet Union, despite the fact that access to archival sources, data, or other testimonies was limited. Twenty years later, the anthropologist Sarah D. Phillips (2009) called for an integration of the communist experience into the emerging field of disability history, an appeal which has been heeded to some extent. During the last decade, disability scholars have become more and more interested in exploring disability during the socialist period in Eastern Europe. These recent trends have certainly been stimulated by a growing interest in non-Western experiences of disability and the attempt to de-center the North Atlantic narrative in disability history. Scholars have criticised the fact that disability studies and disability history have almost exclusively focussed on Western societies while neglecting the challenges disabled people outside liberal-democratic settings have faced (Grech 2015; Grech and Soldatic 2016). While seminal works such as Henri-Jacques Stiker's *A History of Disability (Corps infirmes et sociétés)* from 1982 or Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) have unquestionably inspired historians in this field, they exclusively explore Western European and North American trajectories. More recent reference works on disability history also maintain a strong focus on the Western world (Rembis, Kudlick, and Nielsen 2018). As Monika Baár (2017: 284) has contended, the Anglo-Saxon framework, in which charitable foundations played—and still play—a central role for the lives of the disabled, does not take into consideration particularities in other societies where 'the role of charities was much more restricted'. An integration of Eastern European experiences thus promises to enlarge our understanding and to yield new insights into the variety of disability experiences in modern history.

Even though the number of contributions on Eastern Europe has been steadily growing during the last years, the field remains scattered. Some studies still focus on non-disabled perspectives by investigating welfare and social policies, the institutional landscape, rehabilitation, or medical discourses and practices. Other contributions follow the principle 'Nothing about Us without Us' (Charlton 1997) and investigate how disability associations or disabled people experienced life during state socialism. As in other contexts, it is difficult to differentiate disability history from other academic fields, such as the history of medicine, and some authors might not even call themselves historians of disability.

Another pattern, which reflects a general trend in Eastern European historiography, is the strong focus on the Soviet Union. While countries such as Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR have received some attention during the last years, the history of disability in other socialist countries, such as Romania or Albania, has yet to be written. These recent developments have been stimulated by new research projects which will likely broaden our knowledge in the future. The University of Kiel and the Bundeswehr University in Munich are hosting a joint project on persons with disabilities in the GDR. Additionally, PhD projects within the research group Disability in Socialist History in Kiel (Germany) are preparing case studies on Czechoslovakia. Finally, the European Research Council-funded project Rethinking Disability at the University of Leiden also encompasses several comparative, cross-Iron Curtain studies on disability during the Cold War (Leiden University 2021; CAU 2021).

Against this background, this paper sets out to provide a synthesis of recent historical studies on disability during state socialism in Eastern Europe. Hence, it seems opportune to raise the question of whether there was a distinct and shared experience of disability in state socialist Eastern Europe. If state socialism is to provide a framework for studying disability, we have to specify which ideological prerequisites led to a convergence of experiences before 1989. In addressing this question, I take recent historical studies as a starting point to identify commonalities and trends within this new field of history. The first part of this paper offers an overview of recent studies on Soviet experiences during both the interwar and post-war periods. Since East Central European countries became part of the socialist bloc after 1945, the second part focusses on the post-war period. Finally, I conclude by discussing the need for a transnational, comparative approach when investigating shared experiences of disability in state socialist Eastern Europe. As the various works discussed in the following sections reveal, disability policies and expert discourses during state socialism were informed by a productivist logic that aimed to increase work capacity as a governing strategy to integrate the disabled into society.

METHODOLOGY

Most disciplines regard systematic reviews as superior and less biased than narrative literature reviews. The Cochrane methodology is one of many widely recognized approaches that uses a rigorous method and claims to avoid bias. (McKenzie and Brennan 2019) However, the question of how topics are framed and which questions should be explored in a systematic review is far from self-evident. The argument that systematic reviews are less biased assumes that the researcher takes up a dispassionate, neutral position, a claim that has long been refuted by theorists of science (Fleck 1979). As Greenhalgh et al. (2018) emphasize, narrative reviews are thus not a 'poor cousin' of the systematic review but should rather be treated as a complementary form of scholarship. Narrative reviews 'select evidence judiciously and purposively with an eye to what is relevant for key policy questions—including the question of which future research programmes should be funded'. Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014) similarly argue that highly systematic approaches downplay the importance of interpretation and dialogical interaction between the literature and the researcher.

Against this backdrop, the overall aim of this study was not to conduct an exhaustive survey of the topic but rather to identify recent historiographical trends. A narrative approach thus offered a viable methodological framework. The search strategy was based on inclusion and exclusion criteria which reflect the current state of research. As a majority of research projects on this topic have been conducted after 2000, only studies published after this date have been included. The geographical and linguistic delimitation to literature in English and German is owing to the fact that a majority of relevant works have been published in these languages. To be sure, a number of studies published in Eastern European languages are available. However, some critical studies simply remain inaccessible due to language barriers (Hegedüs 2009; Stasiak 2021), while other works are disconnected from current theoretical discussions in disability studies and have been excluded (Moldovan 2010).

The search was guided by the overarching research question (disability during state socialism in Eastern Europe) and combined a convenient snowball sampling with scoping searches. In order to track relevant literature, the search started by inspecting bibliographic records in the most recent works on this topic. Additionally, searches were conducted in databases deemed relevant to the study, including Web of Science, JSTOR and KVK (*Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog*), thus covering publications in both English and German. After the search was undertaken, journal articles, book chapters, and monographs were selected for reading. Following Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2014) framework, the review focused on a manageable set of relevant studies. The core themes that were identified (disability, productivism, and work capacity) structure the presentation and run like a thread throughout the narrative.

Michael Rasell and Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova's (2016) multi-authored volume on *Disability in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* was one of the first attempts after 1989 to give a sense of the major themes in disability research on Eastern Europe. Published almost 25 years after the fall of communism, the volume offers an invaluable insight into both experiences of disability before 1989 and during the post-socialist transition. The authors cover a broad range of themes and shed light on the lives of the disabled in countries such as the Soviet Union, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Caucasian region. Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova justifiably argue that the marginalisation of disabled people in Eastern European countries cannot only be traced back to the communist past. Not only did welfare policies follow different trajectories before 1989, but during post-communist transitions, communist legacies were recombined with liberal policies, resulting in both continuity and abrupt changes. While disabled people in Eastern Europe gained greater freedom after 1989, most welfare systems and the aim to reduce disabling barriers were weakened during the political and economic transition. The book chapters mirror these ambivalent developments and examine the difficulties of deinstitutionalization processes and educational reforms.

A topic that runs through many of the chapters in the book is the paramount role of labour and its impact on disability policies, which is scrutinized more closely by Darja Završek (2016). The treatment of disabled war veterans after the 'Great Patriotic War', analysed by Beate Fieseler (2016), also exemplifies this aspect. Being defined as the most important instrument of reintegration, labour fulfilled the function of deterring disabled war veterans from seeking a livelihood outside officially sanctioned workplaces. Indeed, war veterans became dependent on alternative income sources such as begging or black-market trading, often more lucrative than state pensions, and many of them ended up in poverty. With war veterans being the largest group of beggars in Moscow in the immediate post-war period, these practices were only tolerated until the early 1950s, when this group was denounced as 'antisocial'. As Fieseler (2016: 33) summarises, 'The discrepancy between the regime's promises towards veterans and their actual treatment could not have been more glaring'.

The development of prosthetic devices for disabled soldiers was one way to repair the bodily and psychological damages that arose after the 'Great Patriotic War'. Artificial limbs were not only crucial to reconstructing the country's war-torn economy and bringing veterans 'back to work'. Protheses also carried a tangible cultural significance, as Frances Bernstein (2016) argues. Since disability was frequently associated with feminisation and devaluated, rehabilitation was conceived as a means to re-establish traditional gender roles. The fate of disabled veterans was also mirrored by cultural representations, studied by Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov (2016). Movies and novels glorified soldiers' sacrifice for their country and typically represented 'invalids' as heroic individuals driven by patriotic feelings. Damaged (male) bodies such as those of fighter pilots who lost their legs were portrayed in detail but as a temporary heroic condition, since those protagonists overcame their impairment and took to the air again. Others portrayed impaired front-line soldiers dedicating themselves to the Party (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2016).

As Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova's (2016) volume illustrates, the aim of achieving high labour productivity was a core component of Soviet ideology. This conviction was informed by a materialistic outlook on the working class as the motor of social progress. In Karl Marx's *Capital*, work ability was construed as a feature exclusively reserved for the able-bodied. Similarly, the struggle over the means of production could only be conducted by the class-conscious, according to Marx. The disabled were, in contrast, deemed a 'residual category' and thus excluded from the forces of social change (Bengtsson 2017; Mladenov 2019). The ideal of the able-bodied worker, underpinned by the aphorism 'He who does not work shall not eat', became central to creating a large-scale industrial production. Originating in the Second Thessalonians, the slogan was translated into a Soviet-type social contract by Lenin and finally found its way into the 1936 constitution. Marx's principle 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' was smoothly transformed 'to each according to his work'. Some scholars have read this shift as a coercive move, demarcating the boundaries between productive and unproductive citizens, which ultimately led to a marginalisation of the disabled (Galmarini-Kabala 2016; Kalinnikova and Trygged 2014).

Soviet officials used several methods to enhance working-class consciousness and productivity. Creating communist shock workers (*udarniki*) was conceived as a means for forming the working class and for the construction of a Soviet worker identity. Named after Aleksei Stakhanov, a miner who allegedly hewed 102 tons of coal during one shift and thus produced 14 times his quota, the Stakhanovite movement soon evolved into a nationwide campaign to maximise labour productivity by continuous norm breaking and 'socialist emulation' (Siegelbaum 1988). After 1945, Stakhanovism went on to be adopted by several other communist regimes in Eastern Europe (Kopstein 2009; Lebow 2016; Mëhilli 2017; Stefan 2003). Additionally, this idealised figure of the able-bodied Soviet worker infused all art forms, especially in Stalinist monumental art. Both visual and literary works portrayed the New Soviet Man as virile, determined, clean-cut, and square-jawed. Simultaneously, femininity and disability became obverse categories of this ideal type, denoting social inferiority. The myth of the New Man was persistently haunted by the figure of the mutilated body that questioned the very ideal of the enhanced, virile worker (Kaganovsky 2008).

Both the productivity-oriented ethos and cultural fantasies of the New Man had a strong impact on welfare and disability policies. From the 1920s, Soviet social policies were characterised by a series of contradictions which were never resolved during the country's 70-year-long existence. From the very beginning of the Soviet experiment, the welfare system was used as a showcase for 'socialist humanism', aiming to demonstrate its superiority to capitalist societies' alleged disrespect for the health of their workers. However, the forced collectivisation of agriculture and the Great Terror during the 1930s stood in sharp contrast to the regime's humanitarian claims, such as the ambition to provide universal health care. As Mark G. Field (2016: 51) put it, the Soviet welfare system was caught 'inside a totalitarian envelope'. In 1930, universal health care was replaced by a stratified system that promoted the most productive industries. This model also applied to disability policies from the 1920s onward. Soviet authorities began to measure disability chiefly by the loss of work capacity rather than by the degree of bodily or intellectual functioning. Additionally, disabled peasants, a majority of whom had been injured during the First World War, were regarded as 'self-employed' and excluded from state benefits until 1965, as Frances Bernstein (2019) shows.

In her monograph *The Right to Be Helped: Entitlement, Deviance, and the Soviet Moral Order*, Maria Galmarini-Kabala (2016) exemplifies the ways in which work capacity became a principal criterion for integrating the disabled into the socialist society, a model which increasingly shaped disability policies from the 1920s onward. In contrast to peasants, disabled wage-labourers were treated preferentially, which created hierarchies of entitlement. Even though the disabled who had no access to wage labour were not systematically excluded, the focus on work capacity 'nonetheless fostered their marginalization', as Galmarini-Kabala (2016: 50) argues. However, the author also underlines that party and government officials did not completely set aside the needs of vulnerable groups. Social protection and the rhetoric of socialist humanism were used as an important legitimising force which informed the humanitarian and emancipatory self-image of the Soviet project. The Soviet moral order thus combined integrative and coercive impulses. Emancipatory concern and programmes for social protection coexisted with marginalising practices. These and other impulses handed down from above by state officials did not remain unanswered. Rather, disabled individuals responded to official requirements by negotiating or by internalising these moral imperatives at the grassroots level. In analysing petitions and applications for social assistance during the interwar period, the author meticulously demonstrates how petitioners reproduced official discourses on disability and thus actively inscribed themselves into the Soviet value system.

In her recent study *Deaf in the USSR*, Claire Shaw (2017) traces the ways in which the All-Russian Society of the Deaf (Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Glukhikh, or VOG) adopted a similar emancipatory discourse. By insisting on their ability to overcome physical incapacity, VOG members demonstrated their eagerness to be counted as productive citizens through their participation in labour. In the Soviet Union, the deaf had been employed in closed workshops and on a small number of farms established the 1920s. Since deafness was perceived as an 'invisible disability', physically less incapacitating than other impairments, it did not preclude physical work or, as Shaw (2017: 14) put it, 'did not prevent an individual from wielding a hammer'. Therefore, Stalin's first Five-Year Plan encouraged integrating a sizeable number of deaf labourers into the state industry. This step was motivated by a belief in the transformative

power of labour, which was expected to turn deaf people into good Soviet citizens. However, when the Stakhanovite movement emerged during the late 1930s, it was no longer sufficient for the deaf to sustain their participation in industry. They were now equally expected to surpass their quota, exactly as other able-bodied workers did. These aspects illustrate that various types of disabilities did not receive equal treatment in the Soviet Union. While disabled war veterans called into question the very ideal of the able-bodied worker, deafness proved to be more easily integrated into the Soviet project.

The Soviet work ethos also had an impact on psychiatric institutions, where therapeutic work became the dominant model, as Sirotkina and Kokorina (2015) demonstrate in their contribution to *Psychiatry in Communist Europe*, a multi-authored volume, edited by Sarah Marks and Mat Savelli. Psychiatrists underlined the psychotherapeutic importance or the self-regulating character of labour, which would make patients more compliant. In the Troparevo labour colony called 'Life and Work' (*Zhizn' i trud*), residents were assigned work in agriculture, while patients in the Kashchenko hospital were introduced to working on machines. As Sirotkina and Kokorina (2015: 47) point out, Soviet psychiatrists interpreted the reorganisation of psychiatry as a 'transfer to the principles of work'. By introducing 'production brigades' and 'work collectives', they translated political imperatives to psychiatric care.

The paramount role of labour productivity was also reflected in defectology, an inter-disciplinary academic field which emerged during the 1920s in the Soviet Union. While the term was a terminological remnant from pre-revolutionary Russia, introduced by the child psychiatrist Vsevolod Kashchenko, defectologists received a considerable amount of state support during the 1920s (McCagg 1989). Defectology not only lumped together a wide range of cohorts, including children with various types of congenital impairments, orphaned or abandoned children, and juvenile delinquents. As Andy Byford argues (2017; 2018), defectologists also developed an instrumental outlook on disabled children and strove for an improvement of their productive abilities. Galmarini-Kabala (2019) similarly argues that the idea of overcoming disabilities by fostering productivity in children resonated well with the Marxist idea of labour as an emancipating force.

While the early history of Soviet defectology has been investigated by several scholars (Smagorinsky 2012), Mirjam Galley's (2021) recent study explores the impact of this discipline on Soviet residential childcare after Khrushchev's 1958 education reform. The author sheds light on the medicalized view of children with disabilities as well as Soviet scientists' attempts to deal with 'deviance' by classifying children along the principle of work ability. Just as the Soviet vision to create 'healthy and useful' citizens was imbued with ideas of usefulness and productivity, the overarching aim of residential education of children was to create 'well-adapted, efficient, and productive labourers' (Galley 2021: 90). Defectology became the dominant model in disability research throughout socialist Eastern Europe and endured the post-socialist transition in most Eastern European countries (Borowska-Beszta 2019; Mladenov 2019). However, a comprehensive history of this particular field of knowledge and its circulation during state socialism in Eastern Europe has yet to be written.

As these various works on the Soviet Union exemplify, discourses and concepts of disability were governed by socioeconomic imperatives revolving around labour productivity. The strong emphasis on productivism was also a core feature in other Central- and Eastern European countries after 1945, discussed in the next section.

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN TRAJECTORIES

Compared to historical research on the Soviet Union, studies on disability in Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) after 1945 are still nascent. Although various disciplines—ranging from special education to psychology and medicine—have scrutinised disability both before and after 1989, historical accounts that capture social, cultural, and political dimensions remain scarce. In many respects, disability policies and disability research in CEE after 1945 resembled the Soviet model, although they often formed a symbiosis with local, pre-war traditions. Moreover, several scholars claim that the invalidating and segregationist legacies outlasted communism and spilled over into the post-socialist transition period (Zaviršek 2016). Teodor Mladenov (2019: 17) argued that the post-socialist liberalisation interacted with the state socialist legacy and created a new version of productivism that led to a devaluation of

people who continued to be regarded as insufficiently 'productive'. In the following, the paper discusses selected case studies on the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary to assess potential commonalities and differences.

Ever since the founding of the GDR, the East German government tried to distance itself from the eugenicist tradition in Nazi Germany and ideologically from the capitalist West. At the same time, some policies, such as a quota system and vocational training for the disabled, represented nothing but a continuation of social democratic programmes established during the Weimar Republic (Barsch 2016). Bunzel (2007) similarly argues that social policies in the GDR were nothing but as a mixture of German welfareism developed since Bismarck and a Soviet-type welfare dictatorship. Nonetheless, the socio-political model established in the Soviet Union was emulated after 1945 by most communist countries, where several accounts testify to the same belief in modern science to correct 'defectiveness'. Students at East German universities could learn in the 1950s that the 'GDR will cease to have problems with mental disorders or other anomalies [since] human beings are formed by their environment and we are constructing a new society' (Barsch 2016: 153). While Soviet defectological literature had a limited impact in the GDR according to Barsch (2019: 64), its East German counterpart, rehabilitation pedagogy (*Rehabilitationspädagogik*), nonetheless conceived disability as a deficit and 'defect'. Rehabilitation amounted to restoring the ability to perform and thus reintegrating the disabled into working life, as Hübner (2000) demonstrates.

Just as in the Soviet Union, in the GDR, authorities aimed to expand the 'right to work' to marginalised groups of society. One of these affirmative action policies required that the disabled comprise 10% of the workforce in workshops and factories (Presber 2001). Additionally, a system of sheltered workshops was introduced in 1969 and further expanded after Erich Honecker's accession to power, which brought about a growth of the welfare sector (Bouvier 2002). Still, legislation to safeguard the 'right to work' applied only to the 'most severely' disabled citizens, as Scharf, Schlund, and Stoll (2019) point out. While some of these affirmative action policies appeared comparatively progressive, there was a discrepancy between the official rhetoric and reality. The requirement to provide sheltered work for all disabled people was never fully accomplished as sheltered workplaces had to fulfil certain conditions, and they remained scarce until 1989 (Barsch 2019: 97). Additionally, accessible spaces and transportation for the physically disabled remained uncommon until 1989. For those pursuing a vocational education, such as the visually impaired, the liberty of choice remained limited and restricted to traditional manual professions, such as basket maker, masseur, or telephonist (Scharf, Schlund, and Stoll 2019).

While the function of sheltered work in the GDR certainly resembled work-as-therapy models in the West, it was officially motivated by 'socialist humanism', which pervaded welfare discourses in many other CEE countries, too. In the GDR, socialist humanism was contrasted with the West German system, depicting it as inhuman and accusing it of systematically discriminating against disabled people by fostering values such as profit and competition (Barsch 2019: 57). These ideological implications came with different terminologies. While the term *Behinderte* ('disabled') became established in West Germany, East German specialists and authorities endorsed the term *Geschädigte*—'damaged' (Barsch 2016).

The creation of sheltered workshops aimed to foster an integration of the disabled into regular working life, but these measures cemented segregationist policies throughout the Eastern Bloc (Mladenov 2019). In the GDR, the absence of inclusive education programmes was legitimised by labour policies which would allegedly facilitate integration into working life after school. Hence, integration and segregation went hand in hand and were not seen as contradictory guiding principles (Scharf, Schlund, and Stoll 2019). As in the Soviet Union, efforts to rehabilitate the disabled in the GDR coexisted with the pressure to perform, which had marginalising effects (Poore 2007).

In Czechoslovakia, welfare programmes similarly drew on ideas formulated during the interwar period and were not exclusively informed by socialist imperatives, as Frank Henschel and Victoria Shmidt (2019) show in *The Politics of Disability in Interwar and Socialist Czechoslovakia*. Just as in the Soviet Union, defectologists in Czechoslovakia sought to enhance the productivity of future citizens. Experts were driven by biopolitical anxieties caused by the prospective increase in 'defectivity' and a massive loss of workforce (Henschel and Shmidt 2019: 125–132). Henschel

and Shmidt exemplify this aspect by referring to Viliam Gaňo, one of the discipline's frontmen in socialist Czechoslovakia. His classification of 'defects' in children encompassed a 'pedagogical prognosis' predicting the 'productive potential' of future adults. Jan Sojka, advisor for the Slovak school ministry, similarly advocated for a "procreation and good education of children" as a prerequisite to securing an 'important workforce' (Henschel and Shmidt 2019: 130). In its effort to satisfy the state's own productivist demands, experts argued that only institutionalisation would satisfy disabled children's needs. Jitka Sinecká's study (2013) on the institutionalisation of disabled children in the Czech Socialist Republic points in the same direction. Parents were continually advised by medical experts 'to put the child in to [sic!] an institution' (Sinecká 2013: 224).

Kateřina Kolářová and Martina Winkler's (2021) recent volume on disability in state socialist Czechoslovakia and other CEE countries also puts productivism at the centre of enquiry. Defectologists in Czechoslovakia, for example, strove to integrate disabled persons by enhancing their 'usefulness', thereby contributing to a hierarchisation of individuals' presumed 'rehabilitability' into the workforce. The various authors in this volume exemplify how socialist societies, from the GDR to Bulgaria, strove to enforce normalcy and able-bodiedness by subjecting disabled persons to the imperative of 'useful' labour (Kolářová and Winkler 2021: 16–19).

Studies on other socialist countries confirm this pattern. Special education was almost exclusively carried out in residential, segregated forms because family care was regarded as detrimental to state interests. Family members were to be unburdened of care responsibilities so as to make them available for work. In Bulgaria, state representatives similarly regarded caring for the disabled at home as causing loss of workforce which could otherwise be used 'more appropriately' (Golemanov and Popov 1976, as cited in Mladenov 2019). As Mladenov (2019: 40) points out, 'Employment segregation and institutional confinement disciplined people to follow the imperatives of production that were central to the state socialist agenda'.

Using the example of polio epidemics in Hungary, Dóra Vargha (2018) traces how Hungarian authorities attempted to combat this public health emergency during the post-war period. While this highly acclaimed monograph (Baar 2020) primarily highlights the transnational cooperation of policy makers and experts who transcended ideological divides, her study also sheds light on the link between disability and modern ideas of production. In line with previous studies, Vargha shows that the prevention and treatment of polio became an important task for Hungarian authorities since the bodies of children with polio threatened communist visions of progress. As 'disfigured arms and immobile legs failed to meet the requirements of production, and health demanded by communist ideology ... it became a central issue in polio care to change the diseased bodies of children back to normal and productive' (Vargha 2018: 49).

These various examples from CEE highlight the paramount role labour productivism during state socialism. Definitions of disability and welfare policies were conditioned by these principles and linked to a medicalisation of disability, creating what Teodor Mladenov (2019: 7) has called a 'medical-productivist complex' during state socialism.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

A common thread that runs through the studies discussed in this paper is the emphasis on productivism in disability policies and expert discourses, a logic aimed at integrating the disabled into the socialist society by increasing their work capacity. The authors show that conceptions about disability were embedded in overarching biopolitical considerations revolving around labour productivity. While the socialist work ethos led to a segregation of the 'productive' from the 'unproductive', it would be misleading to conceive disability during state socialism exclusively as a history of discrimination and marginalisation. Disability histories 'from below' point to the fact that disabled people in various historical contexts played an active role in reproducing and recreating discourses that defined disability, demonstrating that the role of the disabled was both more complex and more ambiguous than past research suggests (Burch and Rembis 2014).

In state socialist countries, disabled persons and associations frequently articulated emancipatory claims and sought to prove their productivity and eagerness to participate in

the workforce. However, these egalitarian aspirations had troublesome implications since integration into socialist societies was strictly conditional on their contribution to the labour force. Social security programmes were primarily formed as a reward system for work, not as a way to meet the needs of the disabled. While those recognised as partially disabled were to be integrated through work placement in regular or sheltered workplaces, this system ultimately had the opposite effect and created a segregated system of work. Residential care for people lacking work ability was similarly motivated by a productivist ethos: absolving family members from care responsibilities at home and aiming to free up manpower. Lastly, although the communist moral order urged the state to provide free health care and other welfare provisions, due to continuous economic constraints, these ambitions were never satisfactorily accomplished.

Against this background, labour productivism can provide a common framework for further investigating experiences of disability during state socialism in Eastern Europe. At the same time, several aspects reflect historical and global trends that go beyond the socialist ideology. The utilitarian ethos of work performance was not invented by communist regimes. Rather, it can be traced back to protestant ethics and the growth of industrial capitalism during the 19th century (Bunzel 2007; Mladenov 2019). Sarah F. Rose (2017) has shown how the industrialisation process in the United States increasingly stigmatised disabled people as ‘unproductive’ citizens and excluded them from wage labour. Works on countries such as the Federal Republic of Germany correspondingly show that disability policies before 1989 were informed by a utilitarian outlook that aimed at normalising disabled persons through labour (Bösl 2009). In both capitalist and state socialist settings, the focus on labour drew on a modernist outlook and production principles such as Fordism that transcended the ideological divide between socialism and capitalism (Kotkin 2001). Neither was the institutionalisation of disabled people a specifically state socialist practice. Residential care was a widespread phenomenon in non-communist countries before and after World War II and can be traced back to the ‘Great Confinement’ (Foucault 1965).

The question is, therefore, if the regimes of productivity examined in this paper actually were a unique feature of disability policies in state socialism? This preliminary comparison indicates that, apart from striking similarities, the state socialist organisation of society fostered a distinct ethos of productivism in which the state exerted much stronger social control than in liberal societies. These findings underscore the need for further transnational and comparative approaches in order to identify relevant differences and similarities when examining regimes of productivity, both in the East and West.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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