S-31 – West - East Transfer of Technology during the Cold War

International Committee for the History of Technology

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Abstract:
The history of transferring knowledge and technology between East and West, socialist and capitalist, big and small states has attracted many researchers. Current historiography proposes new sources and approaches studying various forms of transfer on different levels, emphasizing not only conventional trade flows from West to East, but vice versa as well as other more or less unofficial forms of technology mobility. They include communication between scientists, attending exhibitions and conferences as well as copying patented innovations and industrial espionage among other channels of transfer, which demonstrate the permeability of geographical, state, cultural, political, social, and institutional borders. This permeability was also attested during the Cold War, results of which demonstrate the significance of East and West transfers and as Karen Freeze puts it in her article on Czechoslovak theatre technologies and their move westward: "we may conclude that the Iron Curtain was more permeable than previously thought". Consequently, technology transfer opens a wide and challenging field of research. Apart explaining movement and exchange of technologies, transfers explicate social, political and cultural transformations they entail and serve for. They also help explain communication of different actors on governmental, institutional, company and individual levels. Following this wide meaning of technology transfers between East and West our session proposal contains empirically based and conceptually solid contributions to the general theme of the congress as well as the ICOHTEC symposium’s subtheme "Moving and removing technology: Territorial movements of technology and technological knowledge". Although much good research on the topic has already been done, there are still many grey areas in this large field. Historiography on transfers still requires more case studies, in particular on small Eastern and Central European countries, involving more areas and focuses in order to develop better comprehension of how soft and hard technologies cross borders, how they influence those who were engaged in transfer, what role did the transfer play in social change and other transformations.

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