

Getting Informed and Inspired: Reflecting on Modern Records Centre at 50 symposium

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Abstract

On 20th September 2023, I attended my first-ever external academic event. This was a symposium organised by the Modern Records Centre on the occasion of its 50th anniversary. The symposium informed and inspired me in my future study and work, on which I would like to reflect in this article. The text first illustrates the broad range of materials available in the Modern Records Centre on the example of my research in this archive. Consequently, by drawing on the personal experience of attending and speaking at the symposium, this critical reflection will identify accessibility as one of the most inspiring aspects of this event. Other benefits connected to this symposium lie in the cross-generational and cross-sector networking of students, early-career researchers, well-established scholars, archivists, and volunteers. In my attempt to reflect on this anniversary event, I believe that the symposium kept its promise to inform and inspire. As examples of diverse speakers illustrate, similar events are beneficial for historical science and academia in numerous ways.

Keywords: Modern Records Centre; symposium; history; inspiration; reflection

Introduction

If you ask senior scholars and academics what career aspect they consider crucial in one's professional lifetime, their answer will probably be along the lines of 'publishing' and 'conferences'. At least that is what I have come across in my studies so far. As a postgraduate student following this advice, when I saw a call for papers to *MRC at 50 Symposium*, I was intrigued by the chance to present my research at an academic event. Even more so since the event was organised by Modern Records Centre (hereafter: MRC), an archive which has played a crucial role in my undergraduate research. I did not hesitate to submit my paper for consideration, but at the same time, I did not allow myself to believe that my paper would be accepted. To my surprise, I was invited to speak at the day-long symposium which aimed to celebrate the variety of research stemming from the MRC's collections.

The Modern Records Centre does not need an introduction for readers from the University of Warwick. Nonetheless, for anyone who is not familiar with the MRC, a brief introduction is in order. Being established in 1973, the MRC celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2023, hence the celebration in the form of an exposition of 50 objects from the archive, and a symposium celebrating the various research directions one can take after visiting the MRC (**MRC, 2023a**). The MRC defines itself as 'the main British repository for national archives of trade unions and employers' organisations', additionally, it also possesses vast 'collections relating to pressure groups, fringe political parties and transport' (**MRC, 2023b**). It is, thus, clear that the MRC collections are immense, ranging from trade unions-related materials to records associated with cycling (**MRC, 2023c**). My research experience in the MRC was mainly concerned with student activism; more precisely, with records from the National Union of Students involving Czechoslovak students in the United Kingdom, as well as the magazine called *The Student* published by the International Student Conference (ISC).ⁱ Little did I know, when I first visited the MRC, these materials were crucial for my dissertation research. Fast-forward two years later and I find myself presenting parts of my research discoveries to not only early-career researchers like me such as Nia Belcher, Amy Longmuir, or Joseph Price, but also to archivists and well-established scholars such as Rachel MacGregor, Professor Carolyn Steedman, or Dr Jessica Wardhaugh.

To avoid overlaps, I am not presenting my full research findings as these are featured in the XXIII volume of the International Students of History Association's journal *Carnival* (**Řiháková, 2024**). Instead, I will first reflect on the material I studied in the MRC, which will confirm the extensive range of materials available in the archive. Consequently, I will attempt to

reflect on the symposium, which enabled cross-generational networking and provided me with motivation for further research and study. Overall, I aim to support the idea of the symposium that the MRC inspires historical research in multiple directions. Furthermore, by reflecting on the symposium and identifying accessibility as one of its core themes, I will illustrate that events like this are beneficial for the improvement of historical science as a whole, and indeed inform and inspire diverse generations of historians. I will especially mention three speakers who inspired and motivated me in my future academic endeavours, that is Kirstie Stage, Professor Roger Seifert, and the 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project presented by Dr Mike Esbester, Alex Gordon, and Cheryl Hunnisett.

My History with the MRC

I first visited the University of Warwick and the MRC in Autumn 2021 as a part of one of my research trips, generously funded through the BA bursary from the Society for the Study of Labour History, to gather as much material as possible for my bachelor's dissertation. My dissertation supervisor at Northumbria University, Dr Daniel Laqua, suggested visiting the MRC, and I must say, it was priceless advice.

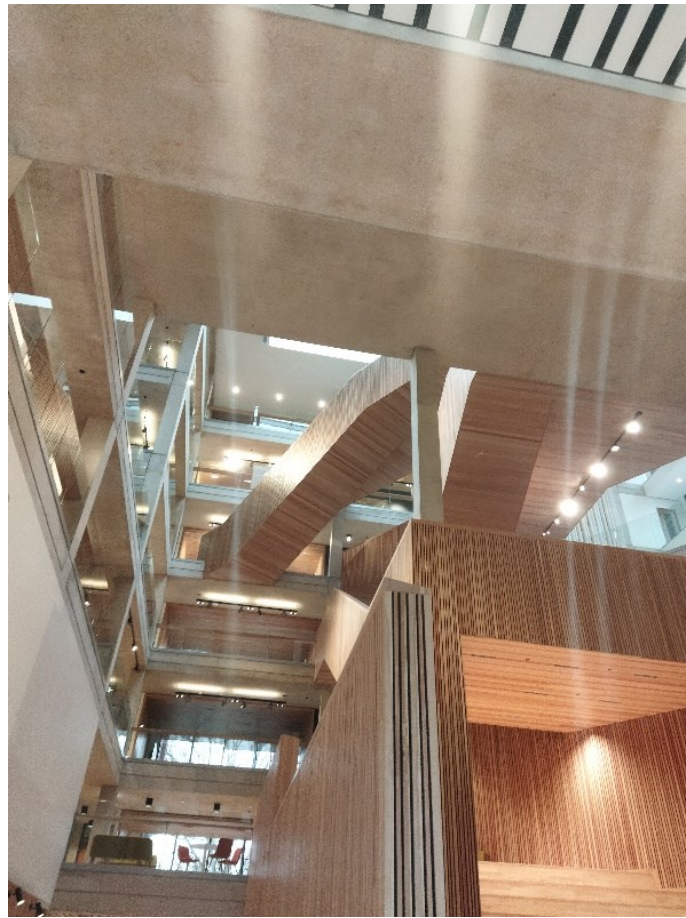
After looking at the National Union of Students collections in the MRC, my research took a specific direction. Part of my argument that developed after the research trips to the MRC, was consequently to argue that there were transnational structures between Czechoslovak and British students after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, which happened on the night from the 20th to the 21st of August 1968. Additionally, the transnational solidarity became evident in the records as well.ⁱⁱ This subsequently provided me with an opportunity to contribute to the existing scholarship on the transnational history of student activism across the Iron Curtain, which proposes that the Iron Curtain was not as impenetrable as it posed to be (**Gildea et al., 2013: 3**). Additionally, my research aimed to support the argument of Caroline Hoefflerle that 'the British student movement both responded and contributed to [...] international dissent movements in the era of the Long Sixties' (**Hoefflerle, 2013: 2**). The MRC records were vital in proving this as they introduced me to the Czechoslovak Students' Scholarship Fund. Launched by Lord Murray of Newhaven on 23 October 1968 and co-established by the NUS of England, Scotland and Wales, the British Youth Council and the United Nations Student Association, the Czechoslovak Students' Scholarship Fund distributed over £143,000 during three academic years to finance studies of Czechoslovak students who emigrated or were stranded in the UK.ⁱⁱⁱ The existence of this fund provided me with a necessary impulse in the argument about student solidarity across the borders of Eastern and Western blocs. Therefore, as is apparent, my research related to the

transnational approach to history, which, according to Pierre-Yves Saunier and Akira Irie, 'acknowledges and assesses foreign contributions to (...) domestic communities, politics and societies, and vice versa' (Irie & Saunier, 2009: 3). This illustrates that the records from the MRC create a unique source base not only for traditional historical research, such as labour history but also for more recent approaches, such as the focus on activism and the transnational aspect, the latter emerging since the early 1990s and 2000s (Struck, Ferris & Revel, 2011: 573).

The Event and its Benefits: Learning experience

The symposium very much reflected the message of displaying the variety of research that can be conducted via the MRC. As any newcomer at an academic event can imagine, I was nervous before attending the symposium, not only due to my student status but also because English is my second language. However, after the warm welcome I received from Rachel MacGregor, Pierre Botcherby, and the rest of the MRC team and volunteers from the University of Warwick, I was more at ease and felt welcomed despite, as I mentioned above, the symposium being my first-ever academic conference. The symposium was held in an architecturally beautiful space of the Faculty of Arts building (**Figure 1**) and was divided into six sections, each reflecting on a specific connecting theme. These included: *Higher Education*, *Latin America*, *Trade Unions and the Wider World*, *Trade Unions and Activism*, *Disability and Health*, and the *National Cycle Archive* (MRC, 2023d). The extensive display of the research informed and inspired by the MRC's collections is, in my opinion, impressive. Furthermore, none of the panels, except for the last one, which included only one speaker, was a 'manel' (a panel consisting solely of male speakers). I was incredibly pleased to notice this since in the Czech Republic, where I come from, 'manels' are common (Homfray, 2019). This aspect of the symposium speaks volumes about its gender equality policy, which is encouraging and serves as an example to all generations present at the event.

Figure 1: Agora (foyer) of the Faculty of Arts Building at the University of Warwick (author's photo)



Additionally, as should be the case with other academic events, the symposium's organisers enabled speakers and attendees to take part in the event remotely, via the Teams software. This additionally served for creating recordings and transcripts, which can be to this date accessed online on the website of the symposium (**MRC, 2023e**). This is a great example of accessibility for colleagues and peers who might not be able to attend in person either due to socioeconomic status, health or simply conflicting schedules. Moreover, the fact that the organisers generously offered to cover the costs of the accommodation for me is also a testament to this ease of access. Personally, I very much appreciated this offer as someone who wanted to take part in person but is a part-time employee and student travelling from a Central European country.

Therefore, the main theme that I took from the symposium was accessibility. Kirstie Stage's contribution to the symposium about her research on the National Union of Deaf campaigns inspired me greatly in her accessible approach to presentations (**Stage, 2023**).^{iv} Kirstie Stage started her presentation by introducing herself, not only as a PhD candidate but also with her appearance. This is something which surprised me, but after thinking about this in more depth I absolutely see the enrichment in this. There might be people in the audience with seeing

disability, who will benefit from Stage's approach. Furthermore, she also made her positionality clear, disclosing her personal connection to her research topic. This is something which should be common across the academic sphere as an essential way in the joint academic strive for objectivity, which according to Paul Newal 'has been defined in various ways and different authors have different conceptions in mind depending on their philosophical background' (Newal, 2009: 173). Only a few people can state with absolute certainty that their positionality to research is objective and they enter the research without any personal bias. I cannot say this either as my research is focused on Czechoslovak, student, international and transnational history while all of these identifiers apply to me as well, having been born to a mixed Czechoslovak family, and having experienced being an international student benefiting from transnational structures. However, as Stage demonstrated to me, acknowledging one's positionality is the first step to objectivity. It also fulfils what Richard J. Evans stressed as important for a theorist and journalist E. H. Carr; 'study the historian before you study the work' (Evans, 2002: 15). Additionally, as a member of a non-disabled community, I also must make my research and presentation of it as inclusive as possible. Kirstie Stage inspired me in this deeply, and in my opinion, larger academia should take on her example as well.

Another beneficial aspect of the symposium was the cross-generational networking and fruitful feedback resulting from these encounters. As someone who researches contemporary history, I had an opportunity to meet people who took part in the events I am researching. For instance, at the symposium, I met Professor Roger Seifert, who was one of the speakers as well. Apart from enjoying his eye-opening paper on British trade unions and colonialism (Seifert, 2023)^v, I received feedback from him as well. He reminded me through sharing his experience from 1968 that the context of the Vietnam War is essential to the period I focus on. This is a valuable reminder since as someone who is still learning the craft of historians, I often immerse myself in my research topic without paying necessary attention to the whole historical context. Thus, at the symposium, I could reflect on my performance and I gained feedback and skills which, I believe, will be of use in my remaining education. Furthermore, the conversation with Prof Seifert inspired me to think about utilising oral history methodology in my future research, as there might be people, who lived through these events and who are willing to share their memories.

The symposium was also beneficial in highlighting the networking of different sectors connected to history. Therefore, from the variety of excellent papers included at the event, the final contribution which inspired me greatly was the collaborative 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project presented by Dr Mike Esbester (University of Portsmouth), Alex Gordon (President of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers), and Cheryl Hunnisett (Volunteer for 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project) (Esbester et al., 2023).^{vi} This paper educated me on the importance of cross-sector cooperation between academics, museums, archivists, and volunteers. As someone who still has not decided which direction to take after completing my postgraduate studies – whether to stay in academia or to get involved in the museum and archiving sector – this project demonstrated to me that it is possible to be involved across these different sectors and that it is beneficial for historical research to do so since such an approach offers valuable and diverse perspectives alongside engaging wider civil society. Additionally, the project also emphasised that volunteers are invaluable in historical research, and their contributions should be acknowledged more. Aspiring scholars might take this example to produce similar projects encouraging community and cross-sector collaboration. I will certainly seek to do so.

Conclusion

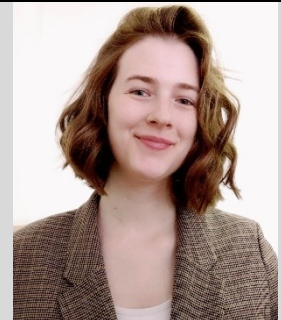
In this critical reflection, I introduced my research in the MRC to illustrate the wide range of research directions one can take when looking into the MRC collections. Furthermore, I also stressed that the MRC was crucial in proving my argument on transnational structures and solidarity between Czechoslovak and British students. Nonetheless, I mostly aimed to critically reflect on my personal experience of attending the *MRC at 50 Symposium* in September 2023. The theme that became the most apparent to me was accessibility. This is because not only was the symposium held in hybrid form, but the financial costs of accommodation were generously funded by the MRC. Additionally, the hybrid form enabled organisers to record the speakers thus making the papers available retrospectively and in a transcribed format as well. I highlighted that open approaches to presentations, such as that from Kirstie Stage, should be introduced into mainstream academia, as they make it more inclusive and objective. Furthermore, I also drew inspiration from collaborative projects like the 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project. Additionally, creating such events as the symposium where early-career researchers can meet with well-established academics is another benefit, since valuable feedback can be shared in both directions. I identified the inspiration and motivation stemming from this event as the two most valuable consequences of this symposium. Where else would I get an opportunity to gain insight into how conferences are organised? For me

this was a priceless chance to broaden my horizons outside of national borders. The *MRC at 50 Symposium* was an amazing learning experience, which alongside practical skills for presenting also gave me motivation to continue my studies. I am indeed incredibly grateful that this symposium became my first-ever academic event.

Acknowledgements

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Archival Material

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Endnotes

ⁱ MRC, MSS.280/29/1, 'Czechoslovak Student Fund', 1968–1972; MRC, MSS.280/29/2, 'Czechoslovak Students in UK', 1969; MRC, MSS.280/29/3, 'Czechoslovak Students in UK/Czechoslovak Student Fund', 1968–1970; MRC, MSS.280/18/6, 'The Student', 1965 – June 1968; MRC, MSS.280/19/1, 'The Student', 1956–1964.

ⁱⁱ If further interested in this research, see *Carnival*, vol. XXIII (2024) (Řiháková, 2024).

ⁱⁱⁱ MRC, MSS.280/29/1, "Czechoslovak Student Fund," Czechoslovak Students Who Choose Freedom in Britain, 24 January 1969; Third Annual Report, 1970–71.

^{iv} See the video recording on the symposium's webpage at 32 min.

^v See the video recording on the symposium's webpage at 5 sec.

^{vi} See the video recording on the symposium's webpage at 15 min.