

WORKSHOP im Osteuropazentrum

„Atomic Heart“: Deconstructing a Controversial Computer Game about Ukraine, Russia, and the Soviet Past

DI 13.06.2023, 17.15 Uhr

Osteuropazentrum (Herzog-Friedrich-Straße 3) / online (Zoom)

The computer game „Atomic Heart“ presents an alternative version of the year 1955, in which the Soviet Union has developed robots, artificial intelligence and flying cars. Now scientists are trying to connect robots, AI and humans via implants in order to form a „collective 2.0“. Quite predictably, this experiment turns horribly awry and a robot uprising takes place. The protagonist, Major Nechaev, is sent by the KGB to save the day. Soon, the malfunction of the machines turns out to be political intrigue.

The year 1955 falls in a quite sensitive period of Soviet history—although Stalin has already died, the Thaw era has not yet started—so the game's sujet raised controversies as soon as it was announced. And while the game journal IGN stresses that „Atomic Heart is far closer to being a critique of Soviet Russia than it is a ringing endorsement of it“, although this critique is „delivered with all the subtlety of an exploding pig“, Ukraine's ministry of digital transformation argues that the game „romanticises communist ideology and the Soviet Union“. What is more, Mundfish, the company developing the game, has unclear ties to Russia. And indeed, after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Mundfish only managed to issue half-hearted statements condemning war in general. Furthermore, the game finally was published on 22 March 2023—a mere two days prior to the anniversary of the invasion, and it contains a number of anti-Ukrainian 'easter eggs'.

It is interesting to see that the specific alternative Soviet history presented in „Atomic Heart“ does not—to put it mildly—reach its full subversive potential. Thus, in our presentations and the subsequent discussion we address different aspects of Ukrainian and Russian perspectives on the Soviet past.

17.15 – Short Presentations

- **Gernot Howanitz** introduces „Atomic Heart“, sums up the recent controversies and links the game to other Russian games featuring alternative versions of the past—which quite curiously all focus on the immediate aftermath of the Stalin era.
- **Svitlana Pidoprygora** talks about alternative narratives and the Soviet Past in Ukrainian literature.
- **Magdalena Leichter** zooms in on alternative narratives and games in general.

18.00 – Roundtable discussion

Zoom-Link: <https://tinyurl.com/bde52afw> (Meeting-ID: 871 7262 2519, Kenncode: 187445)