

# Reviews and Review Articles



**Katarzyna Matul**

***Jak to było możliwe? O powstawaniu***

***Międzynarodowego Biennale Plakatu w Warszawie***

**[How Was It Possible? The Origins of the International  
Poster Biennale in Warsaw]**

**Universitas, Kraków 2015**

The cultural policy of the Polish People's Republic and the history of artistic milieus in Communist Poland have been widely described in the literature, to mention but Konrad Rokicki's *Literaci. Relacje między literatami a władzami PRL w latach 1956–1970* or Andrzej Krajewski's *Między współpracą a oporem. Twórcy kultury wobec systemu politycznego PRL (1975–1980)*. However, research tends to focus on issues connected with the literary milieu (especially that centered around the Warsaw branch of the Polish Writers' Union), the problem of censorship, and the political aspects of "resistance" and "collaboration". Consequently, a great many significant questions concerning the nature of the Polish People's Republic and the mechanisms and processes functioning in the culture of that period remain unanswered.

Katarzyna Matul, an art historian specializing in poster art, has authored a short book on the origins of the International Poster Biennale in Warsaw in 1966. Declaring plans for further research, she offers an interesting perspective on the relationship between the Communist authorities and culture in the Polish People's Republic. The case study of the International Poster Biennale provides many valuable and thought-provoking insights, helping us to better understand the reality and mechanisms of an authoritarian state.

The poster was a Polish speciality developed in a distinctive environment, where – unlike in the Capitalist countries of the West – the commercial aspect was of no significance. Supported by state institutions, film, political and artistic posters flourished rapidly in Poland. An entire institutionalised system of commissioning posters came into being, engaging such eminent artists as Henryk Tomaszewski, Jan Lenica, Wojciech Zamecznik and Roman Cieślęwicz. "Just like athletics, boxing, coal or ham, the Polish poster is an export product, albeit in the field of culture. It may not bring us foreign currency, but it is great for promoting Poland around the world" – said Eryk Lipiński in an interview for "Żołnierz Wolności" in 1965, justifying the organisation of the Biennale.

The Communist authorities wanted to use the Biennale in their commemorations of the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Polish State in order to manifest the status of Socialist Poland, and also to present the artistic poster and the Polish School of Posters in opposition to the commercial (i.e. advertising) posters of the West. The idea of the Biennale, pushed forward by Eryk Lipiński and Józef Mroszczak, fitted in perfectly with the propaganda objectives of the authorities and the Minister of Culture, Lucjan Motyka.

Matul analyses documents concerning the Biennale and contemporary press materials to present the interests and values which motivated particular groups, i.e. the authorities, the graphic artists and art theoreticians. The artists of the Polish School of Posters strove to turn the poster into a form of high artistic value – an expression of their perception, interpretations and observations on a given subject. The poster was to be “consecrated” – promoted to a genre of contemporary art – and moved from the streets to the galleries. This is where the views and motives of very different groups came together: on the one hand, there were the Communist authorities, while on the other theoreticians of art such as Jan Białostocki and Mieczysław Porębski, influential museologists like Stanisław Lorentz, and graphic artists, among them Józef Mroszczak, Eryk Lipiński and Jan Lenica. As her case study the author chose the period when while functioning as an artistic genre in its own right, the poster was also subjected to specific political interests and pressure.

The Communist authorities saw the Polish poster as an element of opposition to the “decadent” capitalist West. At the same time, however, the Biennale was a very “Western” idea. The first International Poster Biennale, featuring the participation of visual artists from numerous countries and an international jury, was held at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in June 1966. At first glance, it may seem strange that such a “Western” event – organized with disregard for the existence of the Iron Curtain – could have taken place in a Communist country. The term “biennale” used in its name alluded to the prestigious contemporary art exhibitions held in Venice and São Paulo. On the basis of minutes of the meetings of the Organizational Committee of the first Biennale, Matul shows that the event was modelled on the leading international art biennales.

This organizational perspective, consciously chosen by the author, allows her to convey the complicated nature of the Polish People’s Republic and the tensions which arose in areas such as culture. The idea of the Biennale fell in line with the propaganda objectives of the cultural policy of the Communist authorities in the 1960s. The analysis of the process of emancipation and institutionalization of the poster as an art form may also constitute an interesting approach to the examination of cultural policy in the Polish People’s Republic. The book features nearly a hundred color photographs and illustrations.

Mateusz Fałkowski



**Jacob S. Eder**

***Holocaust Angst. The Federal Republic  
of Germany & American Holocaust  
Memory since the 1970s***

**Oxford University Press 2016**

**[*Lęk przed Holocaustem. Republika Federalna Niemiec a amerykańska pamięć o Holocaustcie od lat 70. xx wieku, Instytut Pileckiego, Warszawa 2019*]**

In 1970s North America, the Holocaust came to function as a moral gauge. As Peter Novick put it, there ensued what could be termed the “Americanization of the Holocaust”. The problem of the Shoah gained a prominent place in popular culture, and became strongly entrenched in television, books, and activities undertaken by various public institutions. Eminent survivors, such as Elie Wiesel, brought the perspective of the victims to the fore, and witnesses played a crucial role in shaping the collective memory of the period. In addition, the culture of victimization – which saw its rise in the wake of the Vietnam War – brought forward a wave of accounts by survivors. In keeping with public feeling, the us government took the first steps towards institutionalizing Holocaust memory. Even if they deny it, governments always strive to institutionalize memory, and it is important to ask questions about these processes. In the us, the formalization of Holocaust memory was supported by President Carter’s decision of 1978 to set up the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, thus leading to the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington. The first design plans were drawn up in 1979, and the construction work progressed through the 1980s. The Museum was finally opened to the public in 1993. *Holocaust Angst*, a book written by the German historian Jacob Eder, gives a comprehensive account of these developments in the us, although it is devoted to another issue – namely, how they were perceived by the government of the Federal Republic of Germany and its Chancellor.

The latter, Helmut Kohl, was worried. In his opinion, the erection of the Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington posed a serious threat to the political goals and reputation of the Federal Republic of Germany. He watched with growing concern as the memory

of the Shoah became firmly implanted in the American collective memory. Basing himself on numerous archival documents, Eder convincingly shows how a network of official and unofficial emissaries of the West German government tried to influence the very structure of the museum's exhibition, arguing both for the inclusion of the history of "good Germans" and the German resistance to Hitler, and for demonstrating West Germany's success in building democratic institutions after the War. Kohl feared not only reputational damage, but also the undermining of the transatlantic alliance, which could result if Germany were to be presented as responsible for the Holocaust and this image became central to the public debate and rooted in the collective memory.

But the majority of these political efforts – both official and unofficial – eventually came to nothing. The museum was established, and Holocaust memory is now a part of American culture. However, contrary to German apprehensions, the museum never had an anti-German agenda. Even German institutions functioning abroad – such as the German Historical Institute – whose mission includes defending the historical and political goals of the Federal Republic of Germany, gradually began to take up difficult questions and issues relating to German guilt (e.g. the problem of participation of the German diplomatic corps in the crimes of the Third Reich).

Eder's book is a very interesting study of foreign policy and the politics of memory, although it should be noted that a similar work – an intelligent reconstruction of efforts undertaken by Kohl's government in the field of politics of memory – ought also to be written with regard to Poland. The context here would be that the West German government not only attempted to shape Holocaust memory, but also sought to neutralize possible Polish claims for compensation for the victims of German occupation policy. This possible direction of research has been proposed for instance in a paper published by Stanisław Żerko in 2017, entitled *Reparacje i odszkodowania w stosunkach między Polską a RFN (zarys historyczny)* [Reparations and Damages in Relations between Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany (a Historical Overview)]. The author cites documents recounting a conversation between Helmut Kohl and George Bush Sr. at Camp David in February 1990. In its course, Kohl drastically overstated the amount of damages already paid to Polish victims by the Federal Republic of Germany so that the issue would not prove an obstacle to the reunification of Germany, and also to blunt the anticipated skepticism of the Western Powers. Eder's book is a good example of how such archival findings can be combined into a whole and effectively interpreted.

Mateusz Fałkowski