Małgorzata Fidelis
Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland

Oxford University Press, New York NY 2022

Kyrill Kunakhovich
Communism's Public Sphere: Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland and East Germany

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It has been some years since the Cold War image of the 'Iron Curtain' sundering East from West began to be questioned by historians of the former Soviet Bloc. In place of Churchill's famous metaphor of impenetrable division, more recent studies have been pointing to important avenues of exchange and communication between the communist and capitalist spheres, particularly in the realm of culture, leading to new metaphors such as Michael David-Fox's 'semi-permeable membrane' or György Péteri's 'Nylon Curtain' [...]. (David-Fox, 2011; Péteri, 2006). Permeability plays a key part in the two books reviewed here, both of which offer rich insights into the connections between culture and politics in Poland and East Germany. Of the two authors, Małgorzata Fidelis is most directly concerned with East-West currents of transnationalism, and *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain* presents a wide-ranging analysis of the 'long sixties' in Poland as part of global phenomena in youth culture that belies the image of the PRL as isolated or insulated from the non-communist world. Looking at a variety of sources from party materials and contemporary reportage to present-day interviews, memoirs, and personal testimonies written for state-sponsored competitions, Fidelis recreates the world of PRL youth with an ethnographic eye that focuses on how young people experienced and understood the cultural, social and political changes taking place not only in Poland but in the world at large. With this aim, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain* covers a wide terrain of topics spanning the period from the early beginnings of the Thaw in 1954 to the peak of consumer socialism under Gierek in 1974. Key events such as the Fifth World Festival of Youth and Students, held in Warsaw in 1955, the Hungarian Revolt of 1956, and the Polish Student Demonstrations of March 1968 are discussed for their impact in shaping Polish

youths' identity and values, bringing to these a more global outlook. But most central to Fidelis' analysis are developments in structures of intellectual and consumer culture such as the growth of youth magazines, student clubs and political circles, rural club-cafés, popular music and avant-garde theatre festivals, as well as expanding discourses on topics such as sexuality, education, and leisure that put youth at the centre as a newly self-contained category within global modernity. In all of these areas influences from the West clearly played an important part, especially in terms of style, dress, music, and other global trends in mass culture, culminating for the purposes of this study in the rise of the hippie movement in Poland at the end of the sixties and early seventies. But what Fidelis makes importantly clear is that Polish youths did not just passively imitate Western patterns, but creatively adapted them to suit their own particular needs and within the contexts of their own social and political reality. Moreover, Western influences did not present only a challenge to the State apparatuses and to the Party, but offered as well opportunities to expand the cultural offering and horizons of socialism in ways that could often benefit the Party's public legitimacy without threatening its political position. It was only when this balance fell apart, when the political machinery could not meet the demands of the expanding intellectual and consumer culture – when theatre performances were suddenly banned or food prices abruptly hiked – that the symbiosis would fail and leaders would revert to cycles of violence and repression.

Cultural policy as a tool of socialist state legitimacy is central as well to Kyrill Kunakhovich's study *Communism's Public Sphere: Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland and East Germany*. Focusing on the two "second cities" of Kraków and Leipzig, Kunakhovich traces the development of socialist state institutions of culture throughout the communist period, comparing and contrasting attitudes and approaches in the PRL and the DDR. Both states, while experiencing their own distinct political courses and crises, followed similar evolutionary paths albeit with different timelines. Vital to this evolution, Kunakhovich argues, were shifting approaches to cultural policy which were watched closely and carefully noted from one bloc country to another, resulting in similar patterns of change. Following this evolution, *Communism's Public Sphere* carefully examines the development of cultural institutions in the two cities ranging from municipal theatres and concert halls, art galleries, houses of culture and factory cultural clubs, to mass media culture in television, radio, pop concerts and so forth. Noting that many of these institutions were in fact inherited by communist administrators from pre-war times – indicating a certain permeability between bourgeois past and communist present – Kunakhovich deftly describes how officials at the municipal level continually sought to adjust cultural programs to suit both ideological or political demands from above and popular demands from below, thus acting in a way as middlemen between the State and its citizens. Central

to Kunakhovich's argument, then, is that culture itself functioned as a vital space of mediation – a Public Sphere – where artists' voices could be heard and the public's responses could be registered as in a public forum. Like Fidelis, Kunakhovich sees culture as being of central importance as a tool for the communist leadership, whether as a means of shaping the Stalinist "new man" in the first phase, cultivating hegemonic legitimacy for the regime in the middle phase, or simply distracting citizens from political and economic crises in the last: as such culture became effectively political, and thus, "[u]nder regimes that banned free speech, spaces of art turned into outlets for political debate" (Kunakhovich, 2022, p. 19). In East Germany this arrangement would continue up to the end, while in Poland the development of more organized opposition and the declaration of Martial Law would lead dissenting debate to become more overtly political, effectively ending the mediating role of the arts.

Both books reviewed here provide invaluable insights into the ways in which ordinary citizens exercised their own agency within the workings of the system, as cultural producers but also importantly as consumers whose support of the regime was actively sought and could be refused, not only by open dissent but more quietly by dropping out (becoming hippies), seeking alternatives (Western music, clothes etc.) or by voicing displeasure, as Kunakhovich points out, through booing, walking out, or simply opting not to attend state-sponsored cultural events. Once uncoupled from the rigid ideological formulations of Stalinism, socialist culture became a malleable work in progress, one that could be shaped by demands from below as well as by orders from above. The result was that cultural policy, rather than being set in stone from above, became what Kunakhovich describes as a 'moving line' of negotiation between official and unofficial art, as permeable as the cultural border between East and West. Fidelis too argues strongly against dividing citizens into 'politically active' dissidents on the one hand and 'apolitical' consumers on the other, noting as well the fluid boundaries between official and unofficial cultures. If on the one hand cultural policy was viewed as a vital political tool by Soviet bloc states, it was at the same time one that could be wielded to an extent by ordinary citizens even in the course of everyday life. One of the great values of Fidelis' and Kunakhovich's accounts is that in covering a vast and multifaceted array of cultural structures and activities both authors show how deeply this process of cultural mediation penetrates into PRL and DDR societies. If there is a weakness in their approach, it is only that in presenting such powerfully broad views of the cultural matrixes, a fuller and more detailed explanation of how cultural acts can serve concrete political ends, whether in the hands of the State or its citizens, may remain unanswered. Readers who are not accustomed to viewing culture as potentially political may therefore be left unconvinced, but this is merely to indicate an urgent need for more

studies that can expand on the excellent work of these two authors with a deeper focus on specific areas of culture within the Soviet bloc as political action.

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