
Stalinism the Polish Way

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Abstract: This is the first part of the introduction to issue 8/19 of *Studia Litteraria et Historica*. The issue focuses on an anthropological and sociological analysis of the years 1945–1956 in Poland and, to some degree, on a deconstruction of contemporary Polish narratives on Stalinism. The author discusses the reasons for reexamining the subject, along with the methodological basis of such reexamination. The article also offers a polemical discussion of Andrzej Leder's interpretation of Poland's Stalinist period.

Keywords: Stalinism; anti-communism; revolution; Polish historiography

“Stalinism,” much like “Jew,” is part of Polish culture's doxic set of categories. It is known to be insulting. It is known to mean something evil, terrible, or grotesque. But how did the word “Stalinism” end up acquiring such connotations? Why is it that every time it is hurled as an insult, the origins of its insulting meaning are pushed further into the shadows? And with these origins, the history of Stalinism itself is being pushed away: of Stalinism without quotation marks. In this issue, we remove those quotation marks. What does that mean? It means that we intend to examine that period setting aside the perceptual categories that are *de rigueur* in Poland, ones that require no justification, legitimized as they are by the paradigm of anti-communism (Zawadzka, 2009).

The first step to be taken towards this goal is proposed by Michał Kozłowski. “Incorporating Stalinism into Polish history would require blurring the boundaries between the internal and external, the progressive and the reactionary, the civic and the feudal, the sovereign and the subordinate, the modern and the archaic,” he writes (Kozłowski, 2019). That is precisely what we have set out to do: we want to incorporate Stalinism into the history of Poland.

We attempt to do so in several ways.

Firstly, we move beyond the consensus around what Agata Zysiak calls the “neotalitarian turn” that has taken place in Polish historiography of the past thirty years, a turn that:

has presented the whole postwar decade in the history of Polish society as a “second occupation,” a dark time of subjugation, oppression and terror. Even if we fully agree with such an approach, elements of the aggravating political situation do not reveal much about social changes. They do not explain social processes or the particular experience of various social groups, such as the intelligentsia, traditionally conservative and critical

of the left, or, conversely, people whose economic status improved as a result of migration from the country to the city (Zysiak, 2019).

Secondly, we step beyond the “dichotomy of authorities and society” (Stańczyk, 2019) by moving away from the classical definitions of individual and group subjectivity, and towards the sociology of social practices. In other words, in this issue we are less concerned with deliberately expressed views, political declarations, and concluded discussions, and more with participations, behaviors, stances, and life trajectories. This approach takes inspiration from Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov’s *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents* (Siegelbaum 2000). Following Siegelbaum and Sokolov, Xawery Stańczyk writes:

Having thus broadened the spectrum of options between support of the authorities and resistance against them, having undermined the worn dichotomy of state and society, Siegelbaum takes another step by asking about the shaping of the Soviet model of individual subject, the Soviet self. The criticized antonymous oppositions are rooted in the Western liberal philosophical discourse, which counterposes the individualized subject against forces external to it. For this reason, instead of transplanting these oppositions as if they were universal, a question should be asked about the Stalinist subject: about how Stalinist policy was internalized, and vice versa, about how the spheres of the intimate and personal became Stalinist (Stańczyk, 2019).

In his *Prześlona rewolucja* [Sleepwalking Through the Revolution], an important reference point for this issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, Andrzej Leder asserts that during the Stalinist era Poles were “desubjectivized” (Leder, 2014, p. 45). The question we ask is: Was this “desubjectification” experienced, or was it rather narrated *ex post facto*, after the experience – e.g. the enthusiasm of the youth, discussed in this issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica* by Agata Zysiak and Xawery Stańczyk – had been vilified, ridiculed, and, in effect, delegitimized? Can anyone act as a subject of history, or does one become such a subject only afterwards, within the dominant narrative? Leder writes: “The revolution performed by authorities brought in on Russian tanks was experienced by the majority as something external, something you participate in without individual will or decision” (Leder, 2014, p. 146). What is the source of certainty that it was experienced this way? Aren’t experiences subject to the ideological structuring of memory? And, finally, what does it mean to consciously participate? For Leder, what matters most is the category of decision, as if individuals and social groups knew, as events were unfolding, exactly what events were occurring, what power these events had to shape the future, and how they would later be classified by historians.

Thirdly, we incorporate Stalinism into the history of Poland by examining it from the perspective of the experiences, interests, and narratives of the dominated groups, not just dominant ones. In this regard, another source of inspiration for this issue besides Leder’s book is constituted by Marcin Zaremba’s *Wielka trwoga* [Great Fear]. Leder describes the agrarian reform and industrialization of the 1940s and ’50s in terms of fear, hatred, contempt, resentment, revenge, and satisfaction of persecuting one’s neighbor. Zaremba, in his turn, sees postwar Poland as “social porridge.” Both authors write about

disintegration, anomy, regressive processes, tribalism, and vengefulness, painting a vision of society “without a lord and master,” stripped of its feudal hierarchies and lacking a capitalist economy or a symbolic sphere organized and controlled by the intelligentsia as a descendant of the aristocracy. It is a vision that says more about the limits of sociological imagination than it does about the organization of society it purports to describe. Leder approaches the peasants and workers as an entity that is external because it is alien to the ruling class. He has no interest in the practices or perspective of the dominated group. He writes about decrees, directives, and top-down decisions, and underscores the authoritarian power of the new rulers, whom he perceives as an occupying force. The externality of revolution is noted in the very first sentences of his book. This is how Stalinism is usually written about.

And that is our fourth point. Framing communism as a system installed in Poland by “aliens” – Russians or Jews, depending on the narrative – is a way of cleansing the Polish community of communism after classifying the latter as a mortal sin. The stakes of this exclusion, as Michał Kozłowski writes, are

political and moral. They are political because they define the boundaries of legitimacy; they are moral because they establish the boundaries of the community. The goal of this approach is to deprive “communists” of the right of citizenship in Polish culture, of being treated as party to the political debate, and – in a radical form of this perspective – to pathologize and criminalize them (Kozłowski, 2019).

With this issue, we reinstate communists into the Polish community, and communism into the Polish public sphere. We do this in order to see what was blocked, prevented, and suppressed in this community and on its agora with the erasing of communism from its history and from its vision of itself. The portrayal of Stalinism as alien and a symbolic gap (Leder, 2014, p. 172) is a product of contemporary ideology rather than a description of the facts. It is a datum that refers to a phantasmatic, rather than factual, order.

Considering the recent literature about the first postwar decade, I see the above distinction between the phantasmatic and the factual as a fundamental one; it is astounding that this needs to be pointed out to Polish historians, who habitually downplay anthropological and sociological propositions as too relativistic and excessively reliant on interpretations rather than facts. Meanwhile, what is surprising in contemporary discussions of Stalinism is namely the historians’ surrender in the face of facts. The psychologization, ahistoricity, and far-reaching relativization encountered in descriptions of the first postwar decade are all the more astonishing considering the dominance of positivist methodology within Polish historiography. Zaremba draws a parallel between the violence perpetrated by Poles against Jews and that of peasants against landlords, using the category of “fear”: Poles feared Jews, and peasants feared their landlords. Leder draws a comparison between the Holocaust and the first postwar decade based on a “sense of injustice”. “In the 1930s, that is, in the period preceding the

revolution, the deep desires regarding the Jews and the landlords achieved completely different means of expression, but their sources were not entirely dissimilar. Both were driven by an entrenched sense of injustice,” Leder writes (Leder, 2014, p. 35). I insist, at this point, that we return to the facts. Poles were not persecuted by Jews. On the contrary: it was Jews who were persecuted by Poles. The harms suffered by Poles at the hands of Jews were phantasmatic. Meanwhile, the status of peasants in Poland was not much different from slavery. The injustice against them, like the injustice against Jews, was real. The reality of exploitation and the antisemitic fantasy are two different phenomena, orders, and mechanisms. In other words, in the aforementioned books “fear” and “sense of injustice” are categories that allow for disregarding social relations. In the introduction to *Sleepwalking Through the Revolution*, Leder writes that what interests him is “the constant flux between the level of what we call historical factography and the level at which the meaning of the facts thus described is transformed within the social conscious and unconscious” (Leder 2014, p. 9). Unfortunately, by analytically equating these two incompatible orders, the category of “sense of injustice” does more to obscure than to uncover such flux. It is impossible to recount history based on a sense of injustice unless it is, in fact, a history of the sense of injustice.

There is, however, one matter on which we agree with Leder: what was at stake in Stalinism was “the reconstruction of the imagery governing the Polish society, the transformation of the entire *symbolic field*” (Leder 2014, p. 160). Katarzyna Chmielewska addresses this matter in this issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica* in her reexamination of socialist realism:

the first postwar decade in Poland saw the only attempt in Polish history to implement a project of radical abolition of distinction, of overcoming the aesthetic horizon as part of the project of creating a new human and a new society. In this sense, communism can be viewed as a performative practice that created social categories with the use of narratives, a practice that focused on oriented sequences of ideas rather than on alternation of forms, and that made great efforts to overcome the horizon of social imagination (Chmielewska, 2019).

The outcomes of these efforts were unsurprising. It ended the way it always does. The Polish way. Class reproduction and *longue durée* mechanisms emerged triumphant. Not even communist terror could eradicate nationalism, antisemitism, and superstition. Leder attributes this failure to the “acute symbolic weakness of the imposed revolutionary discourse of the period,” which either imitated its Russian counterpart or appealed to nationalist traditions without offering any new quality in the symbolic sphere (Leder, 2014, p. 171). Chmielewska makes a contrary argument:

[Socialist realism] disrupted the established order by envisioning the experience of social change at the level of its representation, it pointed out model paths for social mobility and set a design for a new human. It thus depicted emancipating workers and peasants, encouraged its audience to make the effort, while also showing emancipation’s costs and obstacles that, in accordance with the empowering narrative, were to be overcome thanks

to the inevitability of emancipation itself and to the determination and persistence of its subjects. Socialist realism encouraged overcoming the class habitus by supplying narratives in which members of new emancipating classes could recognize themselves and their own biographies – stories of the builders of cities, of factories, of the new state. Clearly and effectively it established the image of the *homo faber*, an object of self-recognition of the new human. Narrating the origins of the postwar workers' movement, the novels of socialist realism treated the 1930s as a negative reference point, a period of definite degradation, of atrocious conditions of alienating work, and social abandonment that could and should be overcome. In this way, then, socialist realism offered a kind of *Bildungsroman* for the new social classes, an attempt to transform symbolic capital by transferring it from the realm of the intelligentsia, where it traditionally belonged, to the new emancipating classes (Chmielewska, 2019).

The failure of the revolutionary discourses of the 1940s can thus be seen as evidence of the power of the reactionary discourse that preceded it, a testimony to the resilience of the patterns of Polish culture.

Translated by Arthur Barys

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Stalinizm po polsku

Abstrakt: Tekst stanowi pierwszą część wstępu do numeru 8 za 2019 rok czasopisma „Studia Litteraria et Historica”, poświęconego antropologicznej i socjologicznej analizie lat 1945–1956 w Polsce, a także – częściowo – dekonstrukcji współczesnych polskich narracji o stalinizmie. Autorka referuje przyczyny, dla których temat ten należy podjąć na nowo oraz założenia metodologiczne takiego przedsięwzięcia. Podejmuje także polemikę z interpretacją okresu stalinizmu w Polsce zaproponowaną przez Andrzeja Ledera.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: stalinizm; antykomunizm; rewolucja; polska historiografia



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