
1945–1956, the Beginning of Modernity

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Abstract: This article is the second 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.

Keywords: Stalinism; anti-communism; revolution; historiography

Contemporary Polish culture circles around its taboo, unable to direct its gaze upon it. The first postwar decade, the years 1945–1956, remains an object of the greatest fear and a subject of strictest prohibition in the contemporary Polish public debate. This period, known as Stalinism, constitutes an embodiment of the darkest evil and a universal source of insults, applicable as a means of delegitimizing any person or idea they are employed against. Stalinism constitutes a national phantasm of an anti-Polish world turned upside-down, a phantasm based on Polish Romanticism's imagery of collective suffering, blood, and death met for Fatherland at the hands of Others. To attach a label of Stalinism to a thought or a person – is to attach a stigma of ultimate otherness.¹

At the same time, a thought reappears in recent critical analyses that this profound otherness might have established a starting point for modern Polish culture, giving rise to the social, symbolic, and economic orders still visible today. A thought recurs that the Stalinist era brought about the beginning of Polish modernity. Andrzej Leder defines the discussed era as a *revolution* that carried with it a “decline of a mentality circumscribed by the village and the feudal manor house, and a rise of mentality defined by the city” (Leder, 2014, p. 7), claiming also that such revolution facilitated the emergence of a middle class. Perceived in this way, it was a revolution that brought an end to the extended Middle Ages, an epoch that in Western Europe continued until the late nineteenth century (Le Goff, 2007, p. 11; 2001, p. 10), and in Eastern Europe lasted considerably longer. A related idea has been brought forward by researchers studying Poland's public and urban spaces, which, in their modern form, remain largely

1 As Anna Zawadzka writes in her discussion of the anti-communist paradigm and anti-communism as the defining category of Polishness, “communism or skepticism towards the national ideology remains [...] a ‘stain’ from which the in-group is ritually cleansed by stigmatizing Others with it: it were the Others who brought the stain, who spread it, and contaminated our community with it. To make the community pure again, we must expel the Others from within its borders. Since communism is the greatest crime and ‘abomination,’ the only way to salvage Poland’s unambiguously positive image [...] is to expose [communism’s] carriers as non-Poles” (Zawadzka, 2009, p. 223).

a product of the same postwar revolution. Warsaw's urban structure is organized by the socialist-realist Palace of Culture and Science, a building that defines both the symbolic space of Poland's capital and the space of the Polish public debate. Michał Murawski, the author of an anthropological study of the Palace of Culture, describes it as a "uniquely effective piece of communist architecture, spatial planning, and, yes, social engineering" (Murawski, 2019, p. 24). Editors of the volume of critical studies on Polish architectural socialist realism, Aleksandra Sumorok and Tomasz Załuski, call socialist realism a *modernizing movement*, and claim that "in this period [1945–1956 – Auth.] another attempt was made at a 'leap into modernity,' and the ongoing modernizing revolution took place simultaneously in the economic, social, educational, and cultural fields" (Sumorok & Załuski, 2017, p. 34).

No scholar directing their analytical attention towards Poland's Stalinist period can do so with impunity. Whoever touches the tabooed sources of Polish modernity is required to pay homage to the national phantasm and to affirm its legitimacy, otherwise the stigma of "Stalinism" would brand them indefinitely. For Murawski, the price was limiting his book's discussion of the meaning of Polish Stalinism to a largely disjunctive polemic with the cultural theorist Evgeny Dobrenko, a critical heir of Cold War Sovietology, described elsewhere as a "debunker of Soviet myths" (Serdiuchenko, 1999, p. 58). For Dobrenko, socialist realism constituted "the mechanism for realizing socialism and simultaneously de-realizing life" (Dobrenko, 2007, p. 19; Murawski, 2019, pp. 19–21). Critically discussing Dobrenko's definition,² Murawski nevertheless does not articulate his own definitions of Stalinism or socialist realism, instead leaving both categories where the Polish imagination wants them to remain: he describes socialist realism as a Soviet invention "exported to Eastern Europe" (including to Poland),³ and marked by "bombastic monumentalism" (Murawski, 2019, p. 42).⁴ This puts Murawski's otherwise

2 Challenging Dobrenko's claim that the "mystical political economy of socialism, which lacks any foundation in human nature, can be understood only in terms of aesthetics" (where "aesthetics" signifies things that are "non-material," "fantastical," "fictitious"; Murawski, 2019, p. 21; Dobrenko, 2007, p. 4–10), Murawski argues that "socialist realism does have a political economy [and not just an aesthetic one—Auth.], because it is an aesthetic doctrine that serves the economic and political imperative to replace the capitalist system of production with socialism and to create the necessary political institutions, as well as the norms and forms of everyday life that would ensure the success and consolidation of these economic changes" (Murawski, 2015, p. 45). Importantly, the polemic with Dobrenko's interpretation appears only in Polish-language version of Murawski's book. In its English version, it is reduced to several sentences, claiming that "the characteristics of Stalinist architectural aesthetics emerged, in the last instance, from a Marxian political-economic intentionality. The aesthetics of socialism, in other words, were not just political but also economic. Socialism as well as its unraveling and aftermath, then, ought to be considered in terms of its *economic aesthetics*" (Murawski, 2019, p. 21).

3 The idea of Stalinism as a *revolution from above* is a classic perspective espoused by Cold-War Sovietology; its proponents include Robert C. Tucker (Tucker, 1977, 1990).

4 Murawski writes that "in Poland, as in other countries of the Soviet bloc, political Stalinism found its aesthetic expression in socialist realism, established in the Soviet Union as the 'official' method in the arts during the 1930s and exported to Eastern Europe after 1945. In urban architecture, this entailed a move away from the clean lines and stylistic abstraction favored by the modernists, toward bombastic monumentalism, ornamentation, and inspiration drawn from the historical orders and vernacular traditions" (Murawski, 2019, p. 42). The author mentions, but does not comment upon, Waldemar Baraniewski's claim about the conceptual continuity between the "bombastic monumentalism" of Socialist Realism and "modernist" architecture (functionalism, constructivism), which led Baraniewski to his conclusions regarding the "supra-stylistic community" of socialist realism and other modernist directions (Baraniewski, 1996; Murawski, 2019, pp. 45–46).

insightful monograph at a terminological impasse, one succinctly described by Tomasz Fudala in reference to contemporary debates over the postwar reconstruction of Warsaw: “‘Stalinist architect, Stalinist construction, Stalinist plan,’ one could hear in the 1990s, just as the poet rhymed a few decades earlier: ‘enchanted carriage, enchanted coachman, enchanted horse’” (Fudala, 2016, p. 15).⁵

The above-quoted *Prześniona rewolucja* [Sleepwalking Through the Revolution] by Andrzej Leder, a work of fundamental significance to the understanding of the postwar decade, bears traces of similar concessions made towards the Poles’ national imaginary, founded equally on Romantic images of suffering, and on exclusion of individuals and groups identified as Others. Andrzej Leder sees the postwar revolution as having been “sleepwalked through” by Poles since, as he argues, it was carried out from the outside by the Soviet Union, without the participation of the “nation,” “without the most subjective parts of the nation identifying with the decisions and actions, and without them taking responsibility for the outcome,” while the visual vocabulary of the revolution was supposedly “entirely divergent from the Polish imaginary” (Leder, 2014, pp. 17, 171).⁶ Importantly, in Leder’s interpretation, the second active subject of the same Polish revolution was, besides Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany. As Leder argues, the Nazis’ second part of the revolution “sleepwalked through” by Poles was constituted by the Holocaust of the Jews, enabling many members of the “Polish nation,” enriched by *post-Jewish property*, to “embark on an ‘adventure’ of modernity [...] over the Jews’ dead bodies” (Leder, 2014, p. 92).

Yet another precondition for any contemporary Polish discussion of Stalinism is the requirement of a reference to the *totalitarian paradigm*. As this paradigm states, all forms of communism and German Nazism were two aspects of the same phenomenon known as *totalitarianism*. Leder adjusts his analysis to the totalitarian paradigm in the same way as he does towards the “national” perspective, all while maintaining awareness of the limitations, misrepresentations, and falsehoods inherent to both standpoints.⁷ He

5 Fudala refers to a 1948 poem by Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński. Murawski’s study provides no definitions of the categories of “Stalinism” and “socialist realism” beyond those cited in the previous footnote; nevertheless, he categorizes the Warsaw’s Palace of Culture and Science as a “Stalinist skyscraper” and calls the theorists of Polish socialist realism “Stalinist ideologues” (Murawski, 2019, p. 34; interestingly, the latter phrase does not appear in the Polish translation of his book [Murawski, 2015]).

6 In the same book, Leder recounts how the Polish national community became and still remains founded on ethnic and class-based exclusion (Leder, 2014, pp. 60–63). Nevertheless, he goes on to comment: “whatever was not copied verbatim from Russia was, more and more evidently, drawn from local reserves of meanings disclosed by *regressive processes* – from archaic, tribal nationalism. During the most radical period of revolution in Poland, there were therefore two main sources of symbols. One was simply copying from Russia, while the other was a repertoire of primitivized national traditions. Nothing emerged that would have been an authentic creation, or a symbol of the Polish revolution” (Leder, 2014, p. 118; italics in original).

7 As Leder notes in *Prześniona rewolucja*, “It is an arduous task to write about the breaking of the social hierarchy that relied on the dominance of the manor house over the peasant – and the resultant thorough reshaping of the connected imaginary – that took place between 1939 and 1956. This is mainly because the events of this period are most often narrated from a national perspective. The narrative dominates which positions on one side the Polish nation with its political and military institutions, and on the other – the occupiers, representing German and Russian nationalisms, made all the more menacing by their totalitarian forms. Such a mode of narrating the events, which emerged already during the war, forgoes any analysis focusing on the complex shifts that occurred in the symbolic field and were connected to the events of the period, especially on the revolutionary changes in the sphere of property and in social hierarchies” (Leder, 2014, p. 118).

nevertheless chooses to write that “both regimes with which the Polish interwar state clashed [...] pursued policies that would later come to be called totalitarian, and that stemmed from two revolutionary premises: the national-socialist revolution in Hitler’s Germany, and the national-communist one in Stalinist Russia” (Leder, 2014, p. 45).

In its ultimate, complete form, the totalitarian paradigm takes the form of the theory of equivalency between two totalitarianisms, an idea promulgated by memory politics activists in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, and other Central-Eastern European states. These activists undertake efforts, largely successfully, to establish a shared European politics of memory on the claim about communist roots of German Nazism and of all other twentieth-century forms of totalitarianism, as well as on the claim of causal precedence of “communist genocide,” allegedly perpetrated on Eastern European Christians, over the Holocaust. In doing so, these activists attempt, as Efraim Zuroff writes, “to change their status from nations of perpetrators to those of victims,” with the ultimate aim “to hide or at least minimize their own complicity in Holocaust crimes” (Zuroff, 2011). This equivalency became part of the European Union’s official historical narrative in 2009, when the European Parliament passed the resolution on “European conscience and totalitarianism,” in which it stated that “the dominant historical experience of Western Europe was Nazism, [...] whereas Central and Eastern European countries have experienced both Communism and Nazism” (European Parliament, 2009). One year earlier, the Parliament established the “European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism,” thereby legitimizing the two totalitarianisms theory as the official memory policy instrument of the Central-Eastern European countries.

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We publish the eighth issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica* with the goal of facilitating a discussion of the first postwar decade in Poland that would go beyond the descriptive categories imposed by the national paradigm. If, as the above-quoted authors argue, the beginning of Poland’s modernity can be identified in the country’s first postwar decade, then the intention of this issue is to enable a critical analysis of that modernity’s components. Our intention is to allow an analysis free from distortion brought by the hegemony of the Polish anti-communist discourse, in which the exclusion of individuals and groups stigmatized as communists constitutes the mechanism of producing Polishness (Zawadzka, 2009, pp. 218–233). It is also our intention to allow a critical analysis that extends beyond the categories that became imposed by Cold-War Sovietology and that to this day remain binding for Polish historiography; according to these categories, the lives of the societies and individuals in communist states can only be described in terms of the dual opposition of either the anti-communist resistance against the state apparatus, or the seduction by its propaganda; either “communist enslavement,” or the “freedom” of capitalist economic “development.” A model of analytical opening beyond these oppositions was proposed by Lewis Siegelbaum in his study of Stalinism; Siegel-

baum postulates “[transcending] the binary oppositions of who-whom, state and society, support and resistance, orthodoxy and heresy” (Siegelbaum, 2004, p. 20); he suggests performing such a turn by directing analytical attention not only and not so much onto the apparatus of the communist state, but also towards the decisions and actions of the individuals subordinate to it. Continuously, by applying the concept of subjectivity to these individuals, Siegelbaum proposes to take “seriously the importance that individuals attached to ‘working on’ themselves so as to embody the Soviet program of modernization” (Siegelbaum, 2004, p. 21).⁸ In laying out this proposal, Siegelbaum relies on Stephen Kotkin’s analysis of Stalinism, in which Kotkin states that

Stalinism was not just a political system, let alone the rule of an individual. It was a set of values, a social identity, a way of life. When it comes to Stalinism, what needs to be explained and subjected to detailed scrutiny are the mechanisms by which the dreams of ordinary people and those of the individuals directing the state found common ground (Kotkin, 1997, p. 23).

We hope that such perspective, applied to the Polish “leap into modernity” of the first postwar decade, will enable an open, critical analysis of an area of study that has hitherto been kept away from gaze.

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8 Quoted from Xawery Stańczyk’s article published in this issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica*.

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Lata 1945–1956, początek nowoczesności

Abstrakt: Tekst stanowi drugą 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.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: stalinizm; antykomunizm; rewolucja; historiografia



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