

Margarita Pavlova

Kyrill Kunakhovich. *Communism's Public Sphere: Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland and East Germany*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022. 354 pp. ISBN 9781501767067.

Margarita Pavlova, International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany; Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam, Germany. margarita.pavlova@zzf-potsdam.de.

The enduring interest in exploring the regimes of public spheres within communist societies has not waned in recent years. Much of this can be attributed to communism's constraints on free expression, rendering cultural domains as almost the sole platforms for public spheres. In his book, historian Kyrill Kunakhovich, who specializes in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, sheds light on the political role played by cultural spaces under communist regimes. By focusing on Leipzig (former East Germany) and Kraków (Poland) as comparative units of analysis, Kunakhovich traces the evolution of state-society relationships within cultural realms under the communist rule, from the arrival of the Red Army in Eastern Europe in 1944 to the reunification of Germany in 1990. The author explores how these interactions reshaped the sociopolitical landscapes of both countries and brought about transformations in communist politics. Employing a comparative and transnational historical approach, Kunakhovich transcends the mere juxtaposition of national case studies examining them in tandem, a perspective that "inevitably highlights the contrasts between them" (p. 16). Given the limitation of comparative case studies that may not fully encompass the entirety of the panorama, the book seeks to illuminate the dynamics within both countries' public spheres as they manifested in communist cultural spaces.

The book follows a chronological organization and simultaneously reflects the evolving societal visions as perceived by officials, with each vision corresponding to a distinct period: Stalinism, National Communism, Actually Existing Socialism—common to both countries—and country-specific crisis periods. The examination of the transformation of cultural spaces into political platforms in both countries is framed by Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere. Kunakhovich adapts the normative model of the "ideal" bourgeois public sphere to various historical contexts and scrutinizes empirical cases recognizing that the public sphere operated differently in communist societies. Therefore, the main objective of the book is to utilize the public sphere as a descriptive model rather than a theoretical concept, demonstrating that in communist societies the public sphere took on seemingly depoliticized forms within cultural outlets. Except for the introduction, however, the reader will not encounter extensive discussions of the concept throughout the book.

One of the central concepts in the study is the "state cultural matrix," defined as the entirety of a state's infrastructure for disseminating, directing, and managing "culture" (p. 7). As Kunakhovich asserts, within the context of an atrophied civil

society, “cultural institutions became some of the most ‘productive forms of communication’ between state and society—however ‘corrupted or regulated’ this communication was” (p. 6). The book, thus, seeks to explore how politics manifested itself through this cultural matrix under communist regimes, a topic that had received limited attention in prior research. In this regard, the author diverges from prevailing approaches that resort to the concept of “gray zones” or the juxtaposition of official and unofficial cultures. Instead, he underscores that “the cultural public sphere was a kaleidoscope of color,” emphasizing that the boundaries and degree of public intervention in the public sphere always varied. This variability, at times, allowed artists to employ state policies in ways that compelled regimes to reconsider or alter their course (p. 11). Such perspective allows Kunakhovich to conclude that cultural policy was not merely imposed from above but rather negotiated within the public sphere despite the power imbalance.

The first three chapters explore Leipzig and Kraków during the Stalinist era, within the context of societal restructuring following the Soviet model. To advance communist ideals in the early postwar years, officials undertook a transformation of the city’s cultural infrastructure, imposing stricter control while heavily drawing from pre-war traditions of cultural administration. In the first chapter, Kunakhovich argues that this restructuring of the cultural public sphere exhibited selectivity, as only certain structures and practices were restored, while others were left unchanged to maintain the status quo. Selectivity manifested in the preservation of local cultural outlets along with their local repertoires, whether it be Nazi-era ensembles in Leipzig or Catholic associations in Kraków. This argument is often overlooked in Cold War scholarship, which primarily emphasizes the import of “Russian high culture” as the primary tool of soft power in postwar Eastern Europe (Gienow-Hecht 2010). Nevertheless, it is worth specifying here that viewing “culture as a political necessity, a means of educating people, and soothing the wounds of war” (p. 31) aligns more with communism in general rather than being specific to German and Polish administrators.

The second chapter further elaborates on the instrumentalization of culture, portraying art as a “planned” tool for disciplining artists and boosting workers’ productivity. To achieve this, officials modernized “cultural matrix” through the establishment of Houses of Culture, club rooms within factories, and amateur music societies. Their goal was to bridge the divide between culture and the working class, ultimately transforming art itself to be more accessible to the masses. By shedding light on both grassroots and top-down perspectives, Kunakhovich unveils unexpected reactions from the target audience of this policy. Workers resisted being planned, and instead, they harnessed the cultural matrix in unforeseen ways that went beyond the officials’ initial expectations. This phenomenon, as the author argues, “opened up a public sphere” (p. 71).

The third chapter delves into the building of National Communism in Poland and Germany in the aftermath of de-Stalinization. The path to National Communism differed between the two countries, yet both utilized national sentiments in the process. The protests of 1953 in East Germany, sparked by unpopular governmental reforms, framed the discontent in national terms. Similarly, in Poland, the strikes in

June 1956, inspired by the Soviet Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev's "secret speech" supported by local party leaders, also manifested as national demands. Nationalism's power was in an ability to offer a language for critiquing communist regimes without directly challenging them, which compelled country leaders to consider the public's desires. Kunakhovich contends that this shift led to the public being treated as a partner to be consulted, rather than merely as "a raw material to be shaped," and allowed for the recognition and integration of the public's needs within the cultural politics of the cities (p. 101).

The following three chapters discuss the efforts to tailor communism to Eastern European societies. The process commenced with an examination of popular desires within the framework of cultural institutions, facilitated by public opinion polling. As the author demonstrates, in both countries this approach led to the self-evident conclusion that the public constituted a diverse body with a spectrum of views and preferences, thereby making administrators recognize and address popular inclinations. While Kunakhovich concedes in the introduction that capturing public opinion was a persistent challenge for communist regimes, the analysis of the reliability of these surveys remains unexplored. As Matt Henn (1998) argues, many respondents in communist Eastern Europe expressed distrust, fear, and skepticism about the survey process, often concealing their true opinions, leading to varying response rates and ultimately rendering the surveys unreliable indicators of public opinion. While this observation primarily pertains to political matters, it raises questions about the extent to which elicited opinions on cultural issues in East Germany and communist Poland can be considered a reliable source.

The fifth chapter probes the consequences of public opinion research, which laid the groundwork for the commercialization of art and the cultivation of a new form of consumerism. During the 1950s–1960s, Eastern European countries sought stability after protests, and the commercialization of art was intended to serve this purpose. By meeting people's material needs and diversifying consumption, including the introduction of Western films, officials aimed to bind people to the affairs of the state. As Kunakhovich demonstrates, this plan did not unfold as envisioned. Once people had the opportunity to choose, they began to assert their agency, demanding more and protesting if officials tried to return to the status quo. This dissatisfaction, according to the author, created a public sphere that officials could not ignore, compelling them to consider public attitudes (p. 156). The argument deepens an understanding of Eastern European societies during the Cold War, illustrating that developments could not be reduced to simple binary oppositions of anti-Western or pro-Soviet; instead, they were multifaceted and permeated both people's behavior and officials' responses.

The sixth chapter continues the discussion about civil cultural nonconformism, which over time evolved into political activism. After the waves of protests, Polish and German officials aimed to control the public sphere, where the public could express itself in exchange for their commitment to building socialism and loyalty to the countries' leadership. However, as Kunakhovich illustrates, these expectations were not met, as critical discussions within state institutions often transcended cultural

boundaries. Artists used their creative works to address political and social issues, occasionally pushing the limits of acceptable critique. The officially sanctioned new literary approach, the “literature of arrival,” led to open critiques of the regime, causing concern among party officials. Even music imported from the West, initially permitted by the state as a means to engage and influence the youth, eventually failed to fulfill the state’s objectives. The prohibition of rock music as a result of officials’ changing attitudes catalyzed one of Leipzig’s most significant unauthorized protests, accompanied denouncement of Western influence, ultimately paving the way for political and leadership shifts in Germany. Similar consequences occurred in Poland following the staging of a nineteenth-century play about Poland’s unique path rooted in national traditions. As the chapter demonstrates, this period allowed for a degree of artistic freedom and social critique, but also posed challenges for both the artists and the ruling party.

The final two chapters shift their focus to the 1970s and 1980s when communist governments sought to combine authority with public appeal. This period witnessed dissent and the consolidation of underground movements, spurred by the signing of the Helsinki Accords. The normalization policy introduced by new political leaders aimed to elevate living standards, improve relations with the West, and reinforce party dogma, stifling any discussion of reform and leaving limited room for cultural expression. As Kunakhovich emphasizes, both regimes tightened their grip on artists and their work, while simultaneously providing entertainment to the public as a means of pacifying and diverting their attention from political engagement. In Poland, this approach led to the emergence of a vibrant parallel cultural and intellectual movement, countering the government’s control over culture and playing a key role in fostering civic engagement and dissent. In contrast, East German activism remained within the confines of state structures. The author’s argument emphasizes that despite efforts to suppress the public sphere, it found ways to transcend and bypass the imposed restrictions.

In the concluding chapter, Kunakhovich examines how dissent gradually evolved into organized protest throughout the 1980s. Cultural institutions in both countries provided a space for this evolution, offering refuge to critical voices while facilitating connections among them. In East Germany, authorities established a state-sponsored underground culture to co-opt the opposition, resulting in a more compliant artistic environment. Conversely, Poland’s influential parallel polis, driven by the Catholic Church, made co-optation impossible, ultimately leading to the legalization of the Solidarity movement. Thus, the 1989 revolution in Poland marked a departure from cultural institutions as focal points of dissent, while in East Germany cultural spaces became public spheres. The author concludes that by the final years of socialism, the cultural public sphere ceased to exist. While it had played a crucial role in facilitating political debate and expression under communist dictatorship, cultural spaces such as theaters, cinemas, and art galleries had allowed for discussions on sensitive topics and had positioned artists as mediators between the state and the public. However, as the political landscape shifted, this cultural public sphere gradually faded away, leaving artists in a state of uncertainty and transition.

To sum up, a general minor weakness of the study is that the concept of the public sphere can become somewhat obscured amidst the rich factual case studies. The author engages with the notion primarily toward the end of each chapter, which might make it challenging for readers to consistently trace the direct connection between the theoretical concept and the detailed empirical examples. This remark notwithstanding, the book offers original research findings and insights that contribute to the understanding of the history of both countries under communist rule and the field of Cold War studies. In recognition of its contributions, the book was rightfully honored with the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Kulczycki Book Prize in Polish Studies for the best book in any discipline in September 2023. Written in clear and captivating prose, the book presents perspectives from both within the system and outside of it, providing a multifaceted view on the subject matter. This study can prove valuable to a wide range of readers, including scholars and researchers in the fields of history, political science, and cultural studies, as well as general readers.

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