

Cathleen M. Giustino, Catherine J. Plum, and Alexander Vari (eds.), *Socialist Escapes: Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 294 p.

Published: 25.11.2015

Reviewed by Dr. Marta Marciniak Edited by Dr. Alexander Simmeth

The editors of this volume have written on Central-Eastern European history before (i.e. Jewish Prague, antifascism in the GDR) and the contributors vary from PhD candidates to scholars teaching in the United States and Europe. They include David Tompkins, who published on the subject of music making and reception in Poland and the GDR in the Stalinist era and Mary Neuburger, co-editor of a volume about consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe.[1] The essays contained in this compilation reflect the diversity of their authors' interests and expertise and address a wide array of historical practices in countries of the Soviet bloc that enabled their citizens to create spaces of relative freedom within the confines of the regimes in which they lived. Interestingly enough, many of the authors point out how the regimes themselves, knowingly or inadvertently, provided these opportunities and tried to encourage or control them, depending on the local circumstances and the time period.

As the contributors show, especially in Bulgaria and Hungary, interactions with the West, and with Westerners, were often involved as a dimension of these escapes, since encounters with visitors from behind the Iron Curtain took place in numerous resorts, established with the consent and support of the ruling parties in order to raise revenue for their ailing command economies. There are other parallels across the articles. One example, where tourism was concerned, was the question of mountain hiking as an activity avidly encouraged by the regimes in Poland and Bulgaria. Another is the idea of socialist progress and consumption as successfully competing with Western standards, since people living in the Soviet bloc were well aware of the lifestyle improvements and fashions from the West (pp. 256-257). Their regimes tried to provide similar attractions for them in the form of (not always) well supplied resorts, sporting events, cigarettes, and alcohol. Some of these activities were outright contradictory to the professed socialist lifestyle, while others happened in spaces carved out of the provided frameworks, as in the case of hitch-hiking or leisurely tourism.

Of course, there were also differences among the countries of the bloc, and these make for an interesting mosaic, too. While Hungary and Bulgaria invested in tourism wholeheartedly, other people's democracies like Poland or the GDR did not do much to encourage the influx of visitors either from brotherly regimes or from behind the Curtain. But flows of people, ideas and practices nevertheless took place on a significant scale: East

German motorcycle racing fans visited Czechoslovakia, as we learn from Caroline Fricke's chapter, and were prosecuted for their displays of camaraderie with West Germans also visiting the races there (p. 222). East and West Germans could meet freely on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, whose well developed resorts attracted droves of visitors from both socialist and non-socialist countries, as Mary Neuburger underlines (p. 153).

While most of the articles focus on consumption and the 'luxury' products and services that were available as means of temporary 'escape' from socialist reality, others underline that it was practices and convictions that played a more important role, especially in the context of lack of even basic everyday consumer goods or outright exclusion from mainstream entertainment venues and practices, as in the case of the punk subculture (briefly discussed here by Alexander Vari, pp. 199-202) or the creative actions of Romanian soccer fans in the 1980s, described by Florin Poenaru (pp. 246-247).

There are other interesting questions that can be asked about the nature of these 'escapes' from socialism. One is whether they should be called 'escapes' in the first place, especially in the case of the last decade of communist rule. Jeff Hayton from Wichita State University has suggested in his paper for 'Dropping out of Socialism: a conference about the hidden side of life in the former Soviet bloc' at the University of Bristol in 2014 that East German punks did not attempt to escape the system – instead, they claim to have ignored it from its margins. [2] He elucidates the various complex, two-way interactions between the subculture and the state, especially its security apparatus, that often resembled a game or an instance of 'sleeping with the enemy,' since numerous punks were informers for the Stasi, but supposedly in order to use the relationship for their own gains, or in the late 1980s, when the regime decided to co-opt some of the bands and offer them recording and performance opportunities unavailable to illegal bands. Hayton also discusses another direction of escapes for punks in the GDR, namely that into the welcoming arms of the Protestant churches. Interestingly enough, none of the articles in *Socialist Escapes* touch upon the role of religious institutions in providing means of escape or opposition toward the regimes.

Out of the ten very diverse chapters of this volume, I personally enjoyed reading Poenaru's 'Power at Play' about soccer in 1980s' Romania the most, due to its fascinating findings about the entanglements of the soccer teams with the system and fans' practices surrounding the games. My second favorite was Fricke's article about motorcycle racing in East Germany, for its valuable transnational viewpoint, quickly followed by Dabrowski's 'Encountering Poland's 'Wild West' – Tourism in the Bieszczady Mountains,' which sketches the gripping, complicated socio-political history of the region.

I have to emphatically agree with several of the concluding statements by Cathleen Giustino, especially when she highlights the need to use oral histories as 'valuable evidence' for the periods not fully researched yet, including the 1950s – here subculture studies especially still have a lot of white spots that need filling (p. 259). It is also important, as she says, to further explore the 'transnational and the transsystemic migration of ideas, images, tastes, and habits' as well as the fact that the Soviet bloc was not as fully isolated from the West as most people would like to imagine: as she proposes, 'the socialist project was deeply embedded in (capitalist) modernity' (p. 257). This is confirmed by my own research into the history of Polish punk. [3]

It is important to keep in mind the agency of some 'subjects' under socialism and their considerable creativity in inventing, also intellectually, their means of escape, often with the assistance of state-provided institutions, with insufficient (or vicious, but ineffective) control, and I do not think that this aspect is highlighted enough in most of this book. Perhaps the most fascinating in this context is the story behind the name of one of Poland's greatest punk bands, Dezerter, who talked in their lyrics of wanting to be 'a deserter with a chance of success,' the point being that (at least for some) the escape needed to be meaningful, lasting, and transformative, as opposed to the numerous temporary escapes associated with consumption that 'Socialist Escapes' tends to highlight, overall.

The volume would be strengthened if more of the articles acknowledged the complications of the subject at hand by adding the perspective of time, as in the Conclusion, when Giustino mentions 'Ostalgie', or when a former hitchhiker briefly comments on the nature of hitchhiking under socialism long after its demise. Sometimes the continuities are more striking than the abrupt changes in the development of culture, and this contemporary re-visiting can be quite revealing as well. It is also surprising that no article addressed the escapes created by the appearance of Charter 77 and the Czech underground rock culture associated with it. According to Petr Uhl (writing in 1985), these 'offer a genuine alternative to the forms of social life that have been fettered and deformed by bureaucratic power and the middle class conventions it supports.' [4] Uhl even talks of an 'alternative polis' that was born then, with 'the capacity to evoke conflict and social awareness,' which proposed an alternative to both consumerism and 'hypocritical morality.' More importantly, perhaps, he criticizes this underground culture for self-congratulation, exclusivity, and 'an escape from its inability to solve practical problems into the world of dreams,' a crucial dimension to explore when studying any movement or practice that professes to provide any real alternative.

[1] David G. Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line: Music and Politics in Early Cold War Poland and East Germany* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2013).

[2] Jeff Hayton, *Ignoring Dictatorship? Punk Rock, Subculture and Entanglement in the GDR*. Paper presented at the conference 'Dropping out of Socialism: A conference about the hidden side of life in the former Soviet bloc' (University of Bristol, June 5-6, 2014).

[3] Marta Marciniak, *Transnational Punk Communities in Poland: From Nihilism to Nothing Outside Punk* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

[4] Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (London: Hutchinson, 1985, 193).



Citation:

Dr. Marta Marciniak: Review for: Cathleen M. Giustino, Catherine J. Plum, Alexander Vari (eds.): *Socialist Escapes. Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, 2013, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/en/publications/socialist-escapes-breaking-away-ideology-and-everyday#r3439>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/en/publications/socialist-escapes-breaking-away-ideology-and-everyday?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=3439>