

## **Student Politics in Communist Poland: Generations of Consent and Dissent**

Data opublikowania: 03.01.2017

Zrecenzował(a) dr Adam Hudek      Redakcja naukowa H-Soz-Kult Redaktion

*This review was first published in: H-Soz-Kult, 21.07.2016, [www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-26059](http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-26059).*

The book deals with the student activism in a country where this phenomenon has a rich history and a distinct prominence. Polish students were politically active since the early 19th-century, both in conspiracies as well in the numerous armed insurrections. As Tom Junes stresses: "These elements – or rather memory of them – would in some way or another influence the student politics in the post-war period since students at different times would become inspired by the historical myth of the previous generation of students." (p. xxii) The Polish student activism of the second half of the 20th-century was therefore formed by the old tradition and played a significant role in all the pivotal crisis in the history of Communist Poland as well as in the fall of its regime. It is, therefore, easy to agree with the author on the assertion: "Student politics played a far greater role in forging people's life stories compared to the relatively minor place it occupies in the hitherto historiography of Communist Poland." (p. xviii)

The volume consists of four main chronological parts. The first one covers the years 1944–1957 – the communist takeover, Sovietization and the de-Stalinization process culminating in the October 1956 protests. The second part deals with the decade of 1957–1968, from the "small stabilization" to the renewed rise of the oppositional activities in 1968. Part three is an analysis of the post-68 persecutions and the subsequent re-emergence of the organized student opposition in the second half of the 1970s. The last section of the books describes the years from the emergence of the Solidarność to the fall of communist regime in 1989. As the heading of the book suggests, the concept of a "student generation" has the critical position in Junes' narrative. The book defines eight such successive generations of either consent or dissent, referring to and being shaped by the five crucial "generational events" defined by years 1946, 1956, 1968, 1980–1981 and 1989. Although such a division could be seen as too vague and generalizing, the author successfully demonstrated its validity in the case of Polish student politics.

Junes points out that Polish student activism, either in the oppositional groups or in the pro-regime organisations, was always a result of the pursuits of a small, dedicated minority. The book focuses on the student leaders from both camps, on their efforts and strategies to mobilize the silent majority of the student

body for certain (not only) political agendas. Their success was largely dependent on the actual politics the regime and the actual economic situation. The author manages to explain the political development in the Communist Poland, so the context of the student movement is easy to understand. However, in the particular parts of the analysis this context should have been broadened to the entire Eastern bloc, especially regarding the development in the Soviet Union. That is the case of the description of the higher education reform in the second half of the 1950s (p. 55–56) which was a direct result of the science policy adopted by Nikita Khrushchev[1] and had a very similar course in other socialist states around Poland.

The study in some length deals with the periodical and rather unsuccessful efforts of the communist regime to reform and reinvent the loyal student organizations after each crisis to make them more appealing. The author presents a complex image of the students' life, describes their lifestyle, as well as their general view of the divided Europe. Important parts of the narrative are the influences from abroad: attraction of the West, transnational political activism (Czechoslovakia being the most often mentioned case) and youth counter-culture. Junes also meticulously elaborates on the importance of the Catholic Church and its principal role in politicizing the Polish student movement. According to these aspects, level of dissent or consent is explained in the individual student generations. What the book lacks is the more detailed, comprehensive description of the students (or even young adults) living conditions and their changes, because the book clearly indicates this factor significantly influenced the moods in the student body.

In addition Junes stresses an important reason for his generational approach. He is of the opinion that Polish students did not achieve political consciousness by belonging to the student community. One of the book's main aims is to falsify the arguments about the detachment of the student opposition movement from the workers' one.[2] According to Junes' research, the student activism was incited rather on generational than on class-specific grounds (p. xxvii). Although the Polish communist regime (contrary to for example the German Democratic Republic) did not manage to change the social structure of the students fundamentally, it still managed to reach a significant degree of uniformity of the youth. As a result, a general set of values used to be shared commonly among workers' class and the students in a generational solidarity, the regime never was able to disrupt. Most of the manifestations and strikes were attended mainly by young people irrespective of their class status. The youthful age rather than a particular milieu was a common denominator for the student protesters at least since 1956. Seen that way, the anti-regime activities of the students belonged to a broader social movement – even in the cases of the genuine student-milieu characterized moments like the protests of 1968. The student oppositional movement was, "only" a part of the intergenerational conflict of the young generation against the Communist gerontocratic establishment.

The description of student politics through the generational "spirit of the age" will undoubtedly incite disagreement as it already did before (although in the different context).[3] Nevertheless, Tom Junes has certainly written a greatly researched and equally well-argued work based on an impressive amount of archival sources including interviews with the former Polish student activists. Many of them still play a prominent role in the Polish politics and many recent political struggles in Poland are still fought by people who actively participated in the student activism before 1989. In this sense, the book brings new insights on the two important topics. It offers a summary of prequels to the well-known episodes of Polish history between 1945

and 1989, as it involves the same protagonists but in younger, student-age. Its subject-matter accentuates the significance of the student political actions and their influence on the political and also social development in the Communist Poland. Besides, it also contributes to the understanding of the background and some of the motivations of many personalities shaping the last twenty-seven years of Polish political development.

Notes:

[1] Benjamin Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia: Universities and Intellectual Life Under Stalin and Khrushchev*, Cambridge 2014, p. 161–171. (Manuela Putz, Rezension zu: Benjamin Tromly: *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia. Universities and Intellectual Life under Stalin and Khrushchev*. Cambridge 2014, in: H-Soz-Kult, 04.07.2014, <<http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-21469>> (27.06.2016)).

[2] Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe. Citizen Intellectuals and Philosophers*, Budapest 2003.

[3] Michael Lind, *Generation Gaps*, in: *New York Times Review of Books*, 26.01. 1997, URL: <<https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/01/26/reviews/970126.26lindt.html>> (27.06.2016).

*This review was first published in: Rezension zu: Junes, Tom: Student Politics in Communist Poland. Generations of Consent and Dissent. Lanham 2015 , in: H-Soz-Kult, 21.07.2016, <[www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-26059](http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-26059)>. © [2017] by Clio-online and the author, all rights reserved.*



<https://www.pol-int.org/pl/node/2164?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=5493>