

Soviet Soft Power in Poland. Culture and the Making of Stalin's New Empire, 1943-1957

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Of the myriad ways in which the Soviet Union attempted to exert control over its new vassal states in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, the use of 'soft power' – which US political scientist Joseph Nye described as 'the power of attraction'[1] – is undoubtedly the least studied. It is this topic that Texas-based historian Patryk Babiracki turns his attention to in his first book-length study, which forms part of 'The New Cold War History' series published by the University of North Carolina Press.

Babiracki's decision to limit his scope to Poland and to the years 1943 to 1957 is justified. Poland was the most strategically important of the Soviet Union's client states and the first postwar decade is, as Babiracki correctly describes it, the 'least explored' in the history of Soviet-Polish relations (p. 8). Nonetheless, a comparative study of Soviet soft power in Eastern Europe as a whole will surely be warranted in the future. Within the confines he sets, Babiracki does an impressive job of marshalling evidence to support his argument that the Soviets effectively botched their opportunity to establish a genuine rapport with the Polish people, a task made more difficult by Russia and Poland's vexed and bloody history which had culminated in the Katyń massacre of 1940.

Babiracki draws on previously classified documents from Russian and Polish archives to argue that culture – so often marginalized by historians in this field – 'played a crucial and wide-ranging role on all levels of Soviet-Polish interactions' (p. 7), and that the efforts of a handful of cultural ambassadors and diplomats more sensitive to the need to establish truly reciprocal relations with the Polish government and its citizens were repeatedly thwarted, not only by Stalin's regime but also in the 'thaw' which followed.

The implications of this failure were, Babiracki contends, ultimately disastrous for the viability of the Soviet empire. The Soviets' disregard for meaningful cultural relations meant that they squandered the only chance they had to win over the hearts and minds of East European citizens and convince them of the feasibility and indeed desirability of Soviet-style communism. The long-term consequences of this decision only became apparent in the 1970s when simmering resentment in Eastern Europe boiled over in an array of political protests, which the Soviet Union was no longer willing or able to crush.

It is with regard to these broader implications that Babiracki's decision to focus exclusively on Poland shows its limitations. While he suggests that the Soviet failure to exert soft power was roughly the same across Eastern

Europe, more research is needed in order to understand the nature of Soviet cultural relations with its client states on a collective level. This could also shed further light on the Polish case – what was 'typical' about Soviet cultural policy here and how did it differ from other East European states?

Babiracki's discussion of the 'Jewish question' in Poland and the Soviet Union in the decade after the Holocaust is particularly fascinating. His passages on the career trajectories of a handful of Jewish politicians in postwar Poland (amongst them Jakub Berman) are riveting, as is his analysis of the tortuous negotiations surrounding Aleksander Ford's 1948 film *Border Street* (pp. 125-133), the first product of Polish popular culture to deal head-on with the Jewish dimension of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943. Babiracki therefore makes a small but important contribution to our understanding of antisemitism and Gentile-Jewish relations in Eastern Europe after the Holocaust.

On the whole, this is a densely researched work of scholarship which displays a real mastery of its source material. It is clearly and at times even elegantly written. A couple of minor criticisms: firstly, Babiracki's attempts to shoehorn popular theoretical concepts into his analysis (for example, using Foucault's 'positive unconscious' to describe the difficulty surrounding the term 'Sovietization', p. 155) are not always convincing. In the 'Sovietization' case, Babiracki's own explanation of the problem is sufficient, and the inclusion of a modish concept – the meaning of which is itself contested – serves only to mystify an otherwise clear analysis. Secondly, while endnotes (as opposed to footnotes) may be typographically neater, they invariably lead to frustration for the reader, especially when only chapter numbers are provided in the Notes, and only chapter names are given in the main text.

This book is essential reading for those interested in Soviet-Polish relations, and will also be useful more broadly to scholars and students interested in the relationships, as well as the mechanisms of persuasion and control, that the Soviet Union established with its satellite states in Eastern Europe.

[1] Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 16.



Sposób cytowania:

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