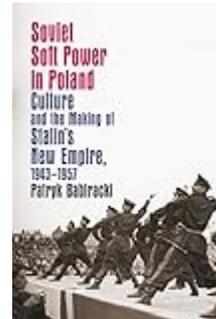


Patryk Babiracki. *Soviet Soft Power in Poland: Culture and the Making of Stalin's New Empire, 1943-1957.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 368 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-2089-3.



Reviewed by Melissa Feinberg (Rutgers University)

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

As the Second World War came to a close, Soviet forces liberated Poland from its German occupiers and helped install Polish communists in power. But despite their role in freeing the country from the Nazis, the Soviets faced what we would today call an image problem. The memory of over a century of Tsarist rule, along with the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland in 1939, made many Poles view the Soviet Union with great suspicion. Similarly, many Soviet citizens held stereotypes about Poles, prejudices that had their own historical underpinnings, ranging from the Polish attack on Moscow in the seventeenth century to the various nineteenth-century Polish uprisings against Russian control of Congress Poland and the Polish-Soviet war of 1919-21. Yet now Poles and Soviets were supposed to be friends and comrades.

Soviet Soft Power in Poland by Patryk Babiracki is the story of how mid-level Soviet officials and their Polish communist colleagues tried to move past this mutual distrust and persuade the Poles that there was much to admire in the Soviet Union. Babiracki concentrates on Soviet-Polish cultural relations, broadly conceived. The book covers topics such as attempts to woo Polish writers and intellectuals to the communist cause; efforts to place articles about the Soviet Union in Polish newspapers; the

drive to import Soviet cultural products, including film, literature, and music, into Poland; exchanges between Soviet and Polish scientists, and Soviet reactions to Polish film, literature, and poetry. The book is organized into five chapters, which proceed for the most part chronologically. The first chapter covers the activities of Polish political officers within the Kościuszko division, the Polish/Soviet army formed on Soviet soil in 1943. Further chapters consider the relationship between Polish communists, Soviet officials, and Polish cultural elites before, during, and after the imposition of Stalinism in Poland, ending with a consideration of cultural relations between Poles and Soviets during the post-Stalin Thaw.

In the book's introduction, Babiracki says that he will focus on the "Soviet experience of cultural outreach" (p. 7). Yet, this turns out to not really be the case. Instead, the book really examines how both Polish and Soviet officials tried to implement cultural policies that would effectively promote communism in Poland, while at the same time staying within the rigid limits of what Stalinism allowed. While Babiracki may be the first to tell the Soviet half of the story, his real contribution is to write a history that gives equal weight to both sides. This is no mean feat, but it would have been even more compelling if it had been telegraphed more explicitly from the beginning.

One of Babiracki's goals is to show that Soviet cultural officers in Poland were not simply boorish villains who tried to impose their will on the population. One of his examples is Major K. I. Orlov, a representative of the Soviet Information Bureau (Sovinformbiuro) in Poland from 1945 to 1949. It was Orlov's job to place articles promoting the Soviet Union in Polish newspapers. Orlov tried to commission pieces that would be appealing to the Polish audience. He asked for nuanced articles that would be sensitive to Polish anti-Russian sentiments, warning, for example, that it would be counterproductive to run articles extolling Soviet collective farms when many Poles feared collectivization. Men like Orlov, Babiracki argues, sincerely wanted to craft messages that would convince Poles they would benefit from implementing the Soviet system in their country. They hoped to use persuasion rather than force to make Poland into a reliable socialist ally. But they were hampered by many factors. Like Orlov, many Soviet officials in Poland could not speak Polish (at best they learned only on the job). Despite his culturally sensitive intentions, Orlov had to rely on translators and did not have the ability to gain a truly deep understanding of the Polish press. Orlov and his like-minded colleagues also often faced reluctant or uncomprehending superiors at home. Orlov's requests for "high-quality" articles from Moscow often went unheeded, seemingly both because the Moscow heads of the Sovinformbiuro did not see the need for them and because there were not enough good writers to compose them. Finally, Orlov and others like him faced opposition from the Polish side. Polish newspaper editors resisted printing Sovinformbiuro pieces even during the height of Stalinism. While the number of Soviet articles published in the Polish press did increase substantially after 1948, Polish editors still tended to reject articles on some subjects, including agriculture, science, and the economy. So, Orlov was not provided with the right materials for his audience and was then not always able to place the materials he did get in the public eye.

The book shows that the Soviet Union missed a potential opportunity to convert Polish hearts and minds to the communist cause. In the period from 1945 to 1948, Polish and Soviet officials alike were disgusted at Moscow's response to their demands for appropriate Soviet cultural products for the Polish audience. Requests, for example, for Russian classic literature, Soviet avant-garde poetry, or even contemporary Soviet film went largely unfulfilled. Rather than listen to what Polish communists or sympathetic Soviet functionaries wanted, Moscow made choices that alienated the Polish intelligentsia, as when

Soviet writer Aleksandr Fadeev showed up at a major international congress of writers and intellectuals organized by Polish writer Jerzy Borejsza in August 1948 (the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace) and delivered a blistering diatribe against Western literature. When he declared that a number of acclaimed Western authors, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Andre Malraux, Henry Miller, and John Dos Passos, were no better than pen-wielding hyenas or typing jackals, Fadeev delivered precisely the wrong message to wavering Polish intellectuals. Fadeev's speech marked the moment when the potential for cooperation was replaced with the reality of coercion.

Yet, Babiracki argues, the Polish-Soviet cultural relationship was not easy to categorize even at the height of Stalinism. Both Polish and Soviet officials did move to institute Soviet models in Poland, but the process was fraught with difficulties. Babiracki stresses the constraints under which both Polish and Soviet actors operated. In this account, zeal is less important than fear. In the scientific realm, for example, Soviet scholars arrived to develop relationships with their Polish colleagues. Polish scientists, however, often found little to admire in their ideologically orthodox Soviet counterparts. They tended to attend their lectures, clap politely, and leave without asking questions or making contacts. In their reports home, the Soviet scholars criticized Polish scientists for their Western orientation and lack of familiarity with Marxism-Leninism. As Babiracki points out, these Soviet visitors may have been trying to compel the Poles to accept the Sovietization of their disciplines, but their actions were shaped by the demands the Stalinist regime placed upon them. When they criticized the Poles, these Soviet scholars hoped to strengthen their own credentials with their superiors and deflect any possible criticism of their own work.

Babiracki concludes that the Soviet attempt to use so-called soft power to influence Poles was an utter failure. While some Soviet officials in Poland tried their best to promote a positive picture of the Soviet Union through newspapers, literature, music, and other cultural exchanges, in the end Stalinism was just not capable of real persuasion. Unlike brute force, soft power cannot achieve results overnight. To truly persuade Poles of the benefits of their Soviet alliance, if it was indeed ever possible, would have required significant resources of both money and time. Stalin was unwilling to invest either. His solution was to force the Poles to at least outwardly conform to Soviet models, whether or not they believed in them. This leaves the question of what to make of the

interactions Babiracki describes in this book. Given that, as he argues, they apparently never had any real chance of success, what is their real significance? Babiracki is equivocal about that. He argues that the interactions between Soviet mid-level officials and Polish communists over cultural policy show that they shared many similar interests and values, despite their mutual prejudices, revealing the possibility of a positive Polish-Russian rela-

tionship, albeit one that was not realized. But then he reiterates that this "squandered potential" would not have changed anything anyway (p. 240). What I take this to mean is that while true Polish-Russian cooperation was not intrinsically (or essentially) impossible, it was made effectively so by the Soviet failure to actualize soft power under Stalinism.

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