



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Visions of Empire: Soviet Union, Poland and the Refashioning of a Soviet Identity.

1. Topic of Research: My topic was Soviet-Polish cultural relations between 1944 and 1956. I was especially interested in how the Soviet side understood its relationship with Poland in the initial years of the empire-building in Eastern Europe. In my research I focused on several Soviet organizations responsible for maintaining social and cultural links with Poland as well as on the people who worked for them. They included:
 - a. The Soviet Information Bureau. It was established in 1941, right after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. It was supposed to serve as an antidote to the Nazi propaganda as well as a source of information from the front to the Soviet people. After World War II, the Soviet authorities recast the institution into both a tool mobilizing public opinion in the West and an instrument of ideological influence in Eastern Europe, including Poland. As such, the institution's managers and employees strove to export Soviet made articles and stories to the Polish press.
 - b. The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations Abroad (VOKS). This was an institution that coordinated a wide range of cultural exchanges with Poland. Its responsibilities included hosting Polish cultural figures, sending Soviet cultural figures, as well as bands, delegation of sports teams, etc. to Poland, monitoring cultural exchanges between the two countries and brief in its conclusions to the central committee. VOKS also acted as a channel and a mediator of exchanges between a wide array of cultural and scientific institutions such as the Soviet Academy of Sciences and others.
 - c. The Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union. It was a subdivision of the powerful writers' organization charged with maintaining links with foreign writers, including Polish. The members of the commission were effectively the executors of the official literary politics in the expanding empire in Eastern Europe.
 - d. The Komsomol. The main political youth organization in the Soviet Union, one of whose tasks was helping foreign students to get organized in the USSR, provide them with help and support in their free time. To some extent, the Soviet state also used it as an instrument of surveillance, and the Komsomol officials reported any existing or potential problems, drawbacks in the organization of student exchanges up the party ladder.

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2. Relevance and contribution to field: Please provide a brief description of the scholarly impact and policy significance of your research.
 - a. The Soviet relations with the Eastern Bloc countries in the immediate postwar period have been studied mainly as direct links between the communist parties. In the case of Poland, such scholars as A. F. Noskova, T. V. Volokitina, L. Gibianskii, A. Paczkowski, W. Materski over the last fifteen years have provided rich empirical analyses based on primary archival sources. They generated questions for debates that are still open, such as: was Stalin determined to Sovietize Eastern Europe from the beginning? What was the degree of the East European autonomy in the postwar period? What was the nature of the political system in countries like Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or Poland between 1945 and 1948? Did the Soviet system have legitimacy among local populations? What drove Stalin in establishing the Soviet-type regimes in Eastern Europe: ideology or realpolitik? Other scholars thoroughly examined the implementation of the local communist directives in particular countries and in various spheres of life, such as education, leisure, press, culture, workers movement and others. Unfortunately, there are no studies of equivalent weight examining the Soviet experience of intervention in the Polish cultural sphere.
 - b. My study will contribute to our understanding of the Soviet side of empire—formation in Poland in the broadly defined cultural sphere, on the level of social—cultural organizations. Examining the new archival documents, I will analyze the way in which Soviet officials other than the few top party leaders tried to engage their equivalents and other key figures in Poland -- and effectively the Polish population -- in the official Soviet project of building communism in Eastern Europe. These unexamined channels of Empire formation are important. First, they illustrate yet another way in which the Soviet officials exercised state powers in an officially sovereign country. Second, they provide material for reflection on the individual experience of human difference and its consequences for state building—both generally and in the Soviet context.
3. A concise summary of your approach and research methodology including a list of research sites.
 - a. I divided my work time between several archives. It was the best approach not only because each body of documents is being stored in a different site, but because archives have often different working schedules, and so when one was closed I was able to use another. The main archives in which I worked included: State Russian Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI) as well as its subdivision, the Archive of Youth Organizations, the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the State Russian Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) and the Lenin Library. I ordered materials based on archival catalogs, and later copied the relevant information by hand or orders photocopies.
4. A summary of your research findings and preliminary conclusions addressing the questions and issues raised in your research proposal. (minimum 3 pages). In my proposal I posed a question: to what extent different visions of imperial identity both among groups of Soviet citizens (soldiers, officials, broader publics) and between them and their Polish equivalents have influenced the stability or instability in this part of the Soviet bloc? During the course of my research I had to revise my question in several ways:

- a. I learned that the way in which the Soviet project was explained to the ordinary Soviet citizens (and the way they understood it) was of little consequence to the project's success. People were informed of the changes that took place in a more or less convincing way. But since these changes affected them little directly and since they had little political power in their hands, the official explanations were only minor details in a greater story about the Soviet progress. It was not, as I had originally thought, a form of Cold War "engagement" on the home front. In addition, each country from the new Soviet sphere of influence enjoyed relatively little presence of its own in the grand narrative of the postwar geopolitical reshuffling, and the official story was standardized. So the problem became less important for me even on the level of articulation, since it shed little light on state efforts to manage difference in a multicultural empire.
- b. I realized that it would not be useful for me to examine the Soviet experience as a problem of "identity." This has to do with the nature of the Soviet sources. The most trustworthy sources I had encountered in my research in Russia were internal, formerly classified reports from Soviet cultural and social institutions that worked with Poland. They contain valuable information on Soviet strategies of engagement in Poland, on Soviet goals and initiative in Eastern Europe in general, and on Soviet responses to specific socio-cultural situations in Eastern European countries. But their authors explained the grounds for the Soviet initiatives in a coded language and logic of Marxist Leninist dogma. The fact that they had to use such language in order to fit into the Stalinist bureaucracy without risking putting their own lives on the line makes it virtually impossible to get to the bottom of who they "really" were or saw themselves and what they "really" wanted -- in other words, issues that are a cornerstone of "identity." I realized that on the Soviet side I would not be able to make conclusions about the individual sense of self and its commitment to the state project. Instead, I became interested in a different problem: to what extent of the enunciative constraints of the Stalinist bureaucracy prevented its participants from articulating the problem of difference in the expanding Empire in a way that it could be more effectively addressed? Is it possible that the Soviets, regardless of their dominant role, were more constrained than the Poles in verifying the truth-claims for their actions?
- c. I concluded, that the problem of identity has much more validity on the Polish side. This is true especially of the cultural figures, who had had for a long time seen themselves belonging to the West in contrast to the Soviet Union, which they thought to be Eastern and alien. At other times, their professional identity took the higher ground, as was the case of journalists and editors of newspapers, who often sympathized with socialist ideals. These people sometimes rebelled not a priori against the Soviet influence in Poland but against the erosion of their rights to inform the Polish public about indisputable events and self evident facts that Soviet authorities labeled taboo. Even in Poland though, the issue of identity was not always the one that caused conflict between the Soviet authorities and the Poles. For example, officials at the Soviet Information Bureau sometimes came into conflict with the Polish Workers Party authorities over publication of certain Soviet articles in the Polish press. My preliminary conclusion is that both groups wanted to achieve the same thing, but differed only on the question of tactics. The Polish Communists had a better sense of what strategy would be more likely to succeed. Similarly, for the Poles who traveled to the Soviet Union and were struck by a lower standard of living, "identity" also seems to have a secondary importance in comparison with the empirical judgment that they made during their personal experience of the Soviet reality. That the Soviet side interpreted the Polish attitudes to the Soviet Union as a problem of

“consciousness” may have well been one of its major systemic constraint to which I referred above.

- d. I decided that the soldiers’ letters I discussed in my initial funding proposal would not be a part of my dissertation material. Upon the initial examination I learned that they did not contain the insights I was looking for, and that these documents deserve to be treated as a separate project and with the different scale of measurement than the one I have been proposing for my study. Having found more institutional materials than I had expected, I also put in question the feasibility of carrying out large-scale studies of Polish reception of the Soviet culture. Instead, focusing on Soviet -- Polish direct cultural interactions between 1944 and 1956 would help me better define the limits of my study. At the same time it would create a more natural sphere of analysis, one that is not limited by a national boundary, but rather by a group of actors who shared their roles in the transnational Soviet project.
 - e. Main preliminary conclusions. Besides the top Party/political connections and the military sector, the Soviet authorities created a third channel of imperial intervention and governance in Poland: social and cultural organizations. It functioned differently than the other two. Stalin used the top Polish Workers’ Party leaders to communicate his decisions on cultural politics in Poland in general terms, and left the specifics of implementation to the Poles. The Soviet military affected Polish culture indirectly, as it provided leverage for the reconfiguration of political forces in Poland and by publishing a few newspapers for the Polish population at the end of the World War II. By liberating Poland, The Red Army endeared many Polish citizens to the Soviet Union and its ideals, but the Soviet soldiers’ countless acts of robbery and violence created deep resentment in others. Through the social and cultural organizations, on the other hand, the Soviet authorities were forming links with people in Poland who were directly responsible for shaping the public opinion. The latter included cultural figures such as writers, newspaper editors, mid-level Party functionaries and scientists as well as outstanding workers, peasants, and students who were invited to the USSR and where expected to praise it after coming back home. My initial analysis reveals that the interactions were neither smooth nor unidirectional, as is often portrayed. The Soviet authorities often had to negotiate specific policies, attitudes or actions with the Poles. Sometimes attempts to gain political capital by inviting the Poles to the USSR misfired and resulted in the threat of ideological infection at home. But this preliminary study also made more difficult for me to accept arguments of scholars such as A. F. Noskova who stress the Polish communists’ initiative and the Polish population’s participation in building the Soviet-dominated Poland. The aforementioned documents show that a) the Soviets actively encouraged and expected such initiative and quickly reacted when it did not take place and b) that the Soviet direct interventions within the Polish cultural sphere where the local initiative was missing were quite frequent and mostly successful. Therefore while the Poles did enjoy a degree of autonomy during the postwar decade, it was hardly autonomy that defined the Soviet- Polish relations during that time.
5. Suggestions for future research. The connection between the Soviet military and Polish (indeed, East European) populations deserves more attention. Much has been written about the experiences of East Europeans upon encountering the Soviet soldiers on their way to Berlin. But there is a story to be written about the soldiers’ experience of the different countries they marched through. A broader study of the Soviet cultural institutions in their entirety would be also a fruitful avenue for research. While I studied closely specific aspects of each institution, I may not be able to answer the questions

regarding each institution's comparative policies towards different East European countries in the first stages of the Cold War.