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Kyrill Kunakhovich’s award-winning book, *Communism’s Public Sphere: Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland and East Germany*, illuminates the centrality of cultural consumption and production in understanding the Communist systems in Eastern Europe. Kunakhovich adopts a highly original approach by writing a microhistory of two cities: Kraków in Poland and Leipzig in East Germany during the post-1945 period. Challenging traditional narratives that are focused on Communist repression, he argues for the existence of a dynamic public sphere in both cities, where the state engaged in continued dialogue with citizens. In societies that lacked fundamental democratic freedoms such as free speech and elections, cultural institutions, including theaters, concert halls, galleries, and student clubs, emerged as the primary arenas for expressing and spreading political concerns from below. As reviewer Tomasz Blusiewicz encapsulates: “culture thus became politics and politics became culture, to a degree that was unknown in democratic countries.”

All reviewers in this forum agree that the book is rich, original, and grounded in impressive archival research. It masterfully blends analytical rigor with engaging content, all of which is executed through clear and elegant prose. The reviewers engage deeply and extensively with the book, commending Kunakhovich’s analysis, posing questions, and elaborating on some of the arguments presented. The forum features a stimulating discussion not only on the book’s content but also on the new methods and conceptual frameworks that are emerging in the historical studies of postwar Eastern Europe. These discussions encompass shedding the vestiges of the totalitarian paradigm, exploring the agency of ordinary citizens, and expanding the analysis beyond the national or system-centric perspectives.

Patryk Babiracki highlights the value of the comparative approach in revealing distinctive features of Communism in East Germany and Poland. He finds the application of the Habermasian concept of the public sphere fruitful, shifting the traditional focus from limitations and restrictions to the possibilities that Communist regimes provided, notably in the role of culture “as a space of communication between the state and society.” Babiracki questions whether the author may have overemphasized the role of culture and its potential to trigger political rebellion, however, and points instead to economic shortages as critical to the latter. Finally, Babiracki advocates for a stronger transnational perspective and a deeper exploration of how cultural differences between the two cities “shaped the transnational linkages between different strata of Polish and East German societies.”

Tomasz Blusiewicz joins Babiracki in discussing the many strengths of the book. Contrary to Babiracki, Blusiewicz finds the argument that culture was central to political upheavals, including the collapse of the Communist regimes in 1989, convincing. He also praises the selection of cities; both Kraków and Leipzig,
with their strong pre-Communist high cultural traditions, were considered important to broader national culture. Both cities later became subjects of Communist state-led molding, such as the building of Nowa Huta near Kraków, and sites of cultural ferment from below, with Leipzig emerging as a center for counterculture in the 1980s. Blusiewicz is particularly impressed with the author’s analytical framework, which situates local developments within the national and global culture of the postwar period, and praises the skillful integration of a microhistorical perspective with these larger contexts. While Blusiewicz finds the use of the Habermasian public sphere concept compelling, he suggests the possibility of a more focused analysis on specific forms of cultural activity, such as novels or music.

Lukas Dovern commends Kunakhovich for his extensive research and the book’s adept balance between empirical detail and narrative framing. Like Babiracki and Blusiewicz, he values the analysis of cultural production as operating within the system rather than outside it. Dovern’s review highlights the challenge of crafting a narrative that encompasses so many different actors and levels of analysis, from local and national history to a comparative perspective and the broader history of Communism. He admires the originality of the argument about “transnational public sphere,” but calls for more specific evidence to support it. Finally, Dovern suggests incorporating the approach of entangled history to intertwine more effectively the local with the regional, while also reevaluating our understanding of Soviet and global influences on Eastern Europe.

Echoing Babiracki, Melissa Feinberg appreciates the book’s fresh approach to the regime’s “constructive role” and its focus on “what Communist governments hoped to accomplish through culture, not just how they censored or regulated it.” She also highlights another important strength of the book: Kunakhovich’s take on consumer culture as a creative and potentially empowering endeavor. Indeed, Kunakhovich challenges the recent literature on postwar Eastern Europe, which has focused on the potential of consumption to depoliticize societies. Kunakhovich, in contrast, is interested in exploring how consumption could be used to reinvent the system or provide new outlets for societal expression. In contrast to Babiracki and Dovern, Feinberg wishes that the local stories of both cities had been more prominently featured in the narrative.

Norman Naimark commends the book for its seamless integration of the narrative between politics and culture. Naimark echoes the curiosity expressed by Babiracki regarding the potential overstatement of cultural achievements and aligns with Blusiewicz’s suggestion to examine in more depth specific genres of culture such as film. He also highlights several unanswered questions, such as the potential influence of the cities’ longer histories on shaping the postwar cultural and political landscapes. He highlights, for example, Leipzig’s long-standing international connections through events like the Leipzig Book Fair, which dates back to the Middle Ages, or its significance as a major center for classical music. Naimark wonders about the impact of the American occupation of Leipzig in early 1945, which lasted six weeks and might have influenced the city, particularly in terms of musical influences or consumer products. Likewise, he ponders

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the long-term effects of Kraków’s tradition of conservative elites and Catholicism. He notes that Kraków’s Catholic elites also participated in postwar transnational endeavors, through travel and exchanges with the Polish intelligentsia émigrés in Paris and other locations in the West.

The author’s response is organized around three key themes that are central to both the book and the forum discussion: culture, city, and Bloc. These concepts enable Kunakhovich to explore issues of scope, place, and conceptual framing. Kunakhovich notes that the book was initially envisioned as a survey of specific cultural and artistic genres. However, upon confronting the archival documents, he discovered that officials lacked a uniform and clear definition of socialist culture, prompting him to incorporate this ambiguity into his study. He also notes that the broad definition of the cultural sphere shaped the book’s scope, leading to the decision to keep other significant developments, such as economic shortages, in the background.

Kunakhovich skillfully navigates the contradictions that emerged from the reviewers’ comments, such as the call for a stronger local perspective (Feinberg) with the critique that local history might overshadow the larger transnational perspective (Dovern, Babiracki). Kunakhovich recognizes the diversity of approaches to urban history and emphasizes his primary objective: to illustrate how local events became translated into national issues and policies. Moreover, Kunakhovich defends the comparative approach in response to suggestions to emphasize transnational exchanges between the two cities (Babiracki, Dovern), address the influence of Moscow (Dovern), or add a third city for a fuller comparative perspective (Blusiewicz). In the end, the author eloquently defends the comparative approach as essential to practicing transnational history, prompting historians to reconsider “what is typically taken for granted, casting old certainties in a new light.” Indeed, *Communism’s Public Sphere* powerfully demonstrates that the intersection between cultural consumption and socialist citizenship was even stronger and more liberating than previously thought. This dynamic not only influenced the practices of individuals and groups but also shaped the trajectory of the entire Communist project in Eastern Europe.

Contributors:

**Kyrill Kunakhovich** is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Communism’s Public Sphere: Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland and East Germany* (Cornell University Press, 2022), which received the Kulczycki Book Prize from the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies and was shortlisted for the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize. Kunakhovich is also the coeditor (with Piotr Kosicki) of *The Long 1989: Decades of Global Revolution* (Central European University Press, 2019). His research explores the politics of culture in the twentieth century.

**Malgorzata Fidelis** is a Professor in the Department of History at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She teaches courses on Modern Europe, Eastern Europe, Gender, and the Global Sixties. Her research focuses on social and cultural issues, particularly everyday life and the relationship between individuals and state power in post-1945 Poland. Her articles appeared in the *American Historical Review, Journal of Women’s History, Slavic Review, Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’Histoire*, and *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung among*
others. She is the author of *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Cambridge University Press, 2010; Polish-language edition, WAB, 2015), which explores how Communist leaders and society reconciled pre-communist traditions with radically new norms imposed by the Communist ideology. Her most recent book *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland* (Oxford University Press, 2022) won the 2023 Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America’s Oskar Halecki Prize and an Honorable Mention of the Association of Women in Slavic Studies’ 2023 Heldt Prize.

**Patryk Babiracki** is a historian, researcher, and teacher at the University of Texas at Arlington. He has authored and edited many books and articles on the global histories of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and has published commentary on history and current affairs in *Washington Post*, *The Wilson Quarterly* and other journals and magazines. More recently, Babiracki became interested in the applications of historical frameworks and approaches to solving present-day issues in organizations and communities. He hosts a monthly podcast on the topic titled “Practical History: The Uses of History in Business, Tech and Beyond” which can be accessed via the New Books Network, Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

**Tomasz Blusiewicz** is a Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution. Blusiewicz is a historian of modern Europe and Russia, with emphasis on the intersection of economics, trade, and politics in the Baltic Sea region. He is currently working on his first book manuscript, “Return of the Hanseatic League, or How the Baltic Sea Trade Washed Away the Iron Curtain, 1945–1991.” This project grew from a doctoral dissertation Blusiewicz defended at Harvard University. In it, he develops a transnational perspective on the Baltic region, from Hamburg in the west to Leningrad in the east, and highlights the role played by Hanseatic port cities such as Rostock, Gdańsk, Kaliningrad, and Riga, all of which served as “windows to the world” linking Communist-controlled Europe with the globalizing world in the Cold War era.

**Lukas Dovern** is a Postdoctoral Scholar at the University of Kiel, Germany. He earned his PhD in History from Stanford University in 2020. His research is broadly concerned with the impact of financial globalization on domestic and international politics in Cold War Central Europe. In addition, he maintains an interest in urban history.

**Melissa Feinberg** is Professor and Chair of the Department of History at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. Her publications include *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), *Curtain of Lies: The Battle over Truth in Stalinist Eastern Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2017, winner of the 2017 George Blazyca prize), and *Communism in Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2022). She is currently co-editing the *Routledge History of Communism* (with Lisa Kirschenbaum).

**Norman M. Naimark** is Robert and Florence McDonnell Professor of East European Studies at Stanford and Senior Fellow (courtesy) of the Hoover Institution and Freeman-Spogli Institute. He taught at Boston University and was a fellow at the Russian Research Center at Harvard before joining the Stanford faculty in 1988. His most recent book is *Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019). He is presently working on a study tentatively entitled, *Why Genocide?*
In this original and beautifully researched book, Kyrill Kunakhovich explores “the political role of cultural spaces in communist East Germany and Poland,” arguing that “in both states, such spaces were a public sphere in which many actors contested visions of the public good” (3).

Drawing on state and city archives as well as a plethora of other documents, Kunakhovich traces the evolution of these spaces from something akin to conveyer belts of values promoted by the Communist states, to forces that served as gauges of public opinion for state functionaries, to spaces of resistance that helped to unravel Communism. Borrowing Jürgen Habermas’s famous concept, Kunakhovich argues that the academic focus on the limitations of the “public sphere” in the Eastern Bloc has obscured the fact that this sphere productively functioned as a space of communication between the state and society.¹

The Communist public sphere involved a remarkable constellation of cultural institutions such as "theaters, concert halls, art galleries, museums, youth clubs, discotheques, cabarets, and factory break rooms" that were bound together into what Kunakhovich calls “the cultural matrix” (6-7). Rather than viewing it as a circumscribed Eastern Bloc which was derivative of the liberal democratic phenomenon, Kunakhovich argues that it deserves to be examined as a force on its own terms. Moreover, Kunakhovich argues, the dynamics of the matrix have often been misunderstood as a constant fluctuation between two poles: the official and unofficial culture, a culture that was for or against the regime. Instead, the author proposes that we see this space as a “kaleidoscope of color,” a much more ambiguous territory that was characterized by more spontaneity and more polyphony than has often been assumed (11).

Kunakhovich follows the transformations of the cultural matrix during the three big stages that the Communist regimes underwent. During Stalinism, officials used it to “mobilize people [and] reform their hearts and minds” (14). Under “National Communism,” officials began to take the wishes of the people into account. Finally, under “actually existing socialism,” they used the cultural matrix “to stave off unrest, both by providing mindless entertainment and by isolating critical voices” (14). While the matrix was designed by the system, over time it morphed into a space which the East European publics co-opted to voice their own demands, which cannot be reduced to pro- or anti-regime categories, and effectively shaped the institutions and experiences of East European Communism.

Key to the transformation of the cultural matrix was the rise of public opinion polling: officials had to ask and keenly observe what East European societies liked and disliked in order to shape and revise their policies. Here the story becomes really interesting and surprising for those who are accustomed to seeing these Communist cultures as merely battlegrounds between the societies and the regimes. Kunakhovich argues that “cultural spaces also functioned as an early warning system, alerting administrators to rising frustration or emerging demands (13).” Thus, in the late 1950s and 1960s East German officials began accosting shocked Leipzig citizens and politely asking about their tastes and preferences. Polish officials re-

developed and mobilized social research in order to learn about ordinary Poles and, as Kunakhovich shows, apply these findings to public policy (104-107). Cases such as this make it difficult to see state-society relations in strictly binary terms.¹

The author’s most original contribution to the scholarship on these topics may be his systematic comparisons between Poland and Germany. Over the years, many scholars have begun to recognize and analyze systematically the post-1953 cultural diversity in the Bloc.² But much of our understanding of these cultural differentials still relies on passing references in general overviews and anecdotal evidence. Kunakhovich moves skillfully between the Polish and East German contexts, and observantly connects the two states’ policies and possibilities to their divergent pasts and structural differences. For instance, to the extent that East German officials felt the need to assert their national distinctiveness vis-à-vis West Germany in the 1960s, they were less likely to promote Western-style rock-music bands. And “without investing in competitions, teaching rock music in schools, and organizing tours, Leipzig administrators lacked the tools their Polish colleagues used to keep rockers in line (177).” As Kunakhovich observes, these very differences made the program of National Communism more fragile in Germany than in Poland.

Kunakhovich’s argument is persuasive and his story, which is filled with lively characters, is fun to read. That said, not all of the author’s formulations are convincing. Kunakhovich argues that "all of the Bloc’s major uprisings had roots in the cultural sphere," which means that "political ferment simmered in spaces of art before spilling out into the streets" (13). There may be room for discussion about how these statements connect to each other, given the significance of economic shortages in the story of East European rebellions.³ But culture certainly played a key role as a sphere of communication and negotiation between the Polish and East German states and societies. The book’s major value is in showing how complex these negotiations were, and how they evolved differently in Poland and in East Germany.

Innovative and well-written, Communism’s Public Sphere will be an important source for any student of modern East European history. Personally, I would love to read a sequel focusing on how the cultural differences between the two countries that Kunakhovich so well examines here shaped the transnational linkages between different strata of Polish and East German societies.

Kirill Kunakhovich’s *Communism’s Public Sphere: Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland and East Germany* is one of those publications where the first part of the title betrays very little of the book’s actual content, whereas the second part captures its essence like no other phrase could. Real politics, such as candidates from various political parties periodically competing in fair elections, were effectively banned in Poland and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1948/1949 until 1989; culture thus became politics and politics became culture, to a degree that was unknown in democratic countries. Given that there was no real public sphere to speak of in the Greek sense of the term (*agora*), all forms of cultural expression and engagement became a kind of proxy or ersatz for such a sphere. This applied both to the physical infrastructure where culture happened (theaters, concert halls, cinemas, art galleries), as well as to any form of cultural expression and reception, from traditional book publishing to street art and music. “Public sphere,” in the author’s understanding, was any genuinely two-way communication on matters of public interest. A genuine two-way exchange rarely took place within the Communist Party, not to mention between other political actors. More often than not, it contained exclusively top-down messaging and directives. Since regimes effectively banned traditional free speech, spaces of cultural production and performance turned into outlets for political debate, even if this uneven and muted “debate” sometimes meant simply booing, clapping, not showing up, or showing up in droves. It was in the directives of the cultural curators (from the ministries) to the culture producers, in the producers’ interpretation and (sometimes creative and or even rebellious) implementation of those directives, and in the audience’s verbal and non-verbal reactions where most of “public sphere” under Communism happened, Kunakhovich argues. His book successfully proves this claim and fills it with rich case studies and examples.

For the regimes, culture served as another transmission belt, one that was sometimes critical as during Stalinism, and sometimes secondary as during the real existing socialism, and that was supposed to shape the new socialist consciousness according to the Marxist-Leninist prescription. But, as Kunakhovich shows, this idea started to backfire in the 1950s. On the one hand, artists never fully gave up their independence even during the most intense period of Stalinist pressure for uniformity (1949–1956). On the other hand, citizens of Communist regimes refused to be passive absorbers of the regime’s indoctrination. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to think about Communism’s public sphere and the actors involved in it as either a place of indoctrination or resistance. Following the thaw of 1956, it became a forum for dialogue—uneven, unfair, and distorted as it was—that in fact substantially changed the regime’s policy on several occasions. In 1980 in Leipzig, cultural figures such as conductor Kurt Masur played a key mediating role in diffusing the tension between the opposition and the East German Communist Party, thus avoiding mass bloodshed. Without them, peaceful change in East Germany would not have been possible. In Poland, public culture played a key role in the 1960s, and underground culture took over after the imposition of martial law in 1981. In both countries, the eventual rapid downfall of the regimes in 1989 is impossible to understand without studying the evolution of culture as politics and politics as culture. The dynamics of relationships in this triangle involving the regime, the artists, and the public, the author shows, was not merely a very sensitive barometer of the political weather in Communist countries, but also the epicenter of events that shook and eventually overthrew the regimes or, at least, replaced their ruling circles, in 1953/1989 in East Germany, and in 1968 in Poland.
The book is a comparative study of two cultural capitals of the two countries: Leipzig and Kraków. This choice makes perfect sense. Kraków was the site of the largest Stalinist social engineering project in Poland: the Nowa Huta Steel Mill and the surrounding model socialist city. This effort was accompanied by an aggressive cultural campaign to uproot Kraków’s perceived conservatism and replace it with a Stakhanovite, conscious working class. Leipzig was not only an ancient seat of high culture (with its famous Gewandhaus symphony hall), but also became the de facto center of counterculture in the GDR in the 1980s, the members of which formed the kernel of the subsequently massive demonstrations in the fall of 1989. The author does not focus on these two cities exclusively, but also provides a detailed backdrop of key events in both countries and the entire Soviet Bloc.

The author’s methodology is a mix of several genres and approaches. Most fundamentally, it is a chronologically structured comparative cultural and urban history of two Eastern European Communist cities. At the same time, it is also a global cultural history, since figures such as the United States’ Elvis Presley or TV series such as the Brazilian telenovela *Isaura: Slave Girl* (1976) are discussed extensively. Analytically, it is an attempt to trace the various political phases of Communist rule in Eastern Europe, as well as pinpoint the turning points between them. The author divides the period of 1945–1989 into three basic phases: Stalinism, “National Communism,” and “Really Existing Socialism.” He shows the extent to which cultural life in both countries precipitated and reflected the big political shifts such as the 1968 March events in Poland and the corresponding end of Polish leader Władysław Gomułka’s reign.

Kunakhovich convincingly explains why a romantic-era play (*Forefathers’ Eve*, published by Adam Mickiewicz in 1822) had the potential to cause such a grand controversy in Communist Poland, something which is hardly understandable for modern American audiences. The banning of that play in 1968 was much more than artistic censorship. It was a drawing of hard political boundaries by the regime. In other words, the government said: nationalist plays were fine, as long as they did not paint Russia in bad light. But what really counted was not the staging of the play as such; rather, it was the audience’s unexpectedly intense reaction to it, the enthusiastic clapping and angry booing whenever Russia was referenced to positively or negatively. Since normal public debate was hardly possible, or, at a minimum was possible within very narrow bounds of party-line, such reactions amounted to a threat to the regime, since they could easily, and occasionally did, spill out into street protest and rioting (e.g. during the Rolling Stones’ concert in Berlin in 1965).

Beyond doing all that, the book is also a transnational history: understanding national outcomes also requires looking beyond national borders. East German demonstrators on October 9 openly referenced the Polish model, and only days earlier a Kraków rally had proclaimed “solidarity with Leipzig.” Poles and East Germans

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watched, interacted with, and learned from one another. In excavating such cross-border entanglements, I suggest that the Eastern Bloc was a transnational public sphere (4).

The multidirectional influences went beyond the Bloc. The cultural magnet of the West, especially of its pop culture in music and film, was equally strong in both countries, but influenced the public differently. While young audiences raved about productions such as the Magnificent Seven (USA, 1960), older generations saw it as a sure sign of the West’s shallowness and immorality. The publicly decreed “friendship with the brotherly USSR” had a much deeper penetration in the GDR than in Poland. These and similar observations are possible owing to the book’s comparative angle. It was the transnational or global cultural phenomena, however, such as the popularity of rock’n’roll or Latin American soap operas, that were particularly difficult for the regimes to handle, because they were designed to cope with phenomena of a nation-state scale in the first place. With time, the most the regimes could do was damage control and flooding the market with, as the author puts it, “mindless entertainment” (193).

Kunakhovich’s work builds on some of the recent explorations of his colleagues in the field such as those by Marci Shore, Malgorzata Mazurek, Jonathan Bolton, Piotr Piotrowski, Piotr Kosicki, Mark Fenemore and others.3 While the author offers little groundbreaking research in terms of empirical novelty (there is a wealth of archives consulted, but most of the information has appeared in other works), the book does offer several truly profound insights thanks to its comparative and analytical framework. The most refreshing one, to this reader, is the demonstration that the old clichéd binaries such as pro- and anti-regime artists completely fail to capture the delicate equilibrium that any artist had to negotiate when performing publicly. With the exception of emigre dissident figures such as writer Czesław Miłosz, who did not have direct access to Eastern European audiences, most artists who did retain such access, e.g. artist Tadeusz Kantor or author Christa Wolf, constantly tested the boundaries of what passed as acceptable for the regime and interested their audiences, thus always expanding the themes and redefining the scopes of what could be published or displayed in the East. Their art and writings, in turn, had the potential to stir the public in unexpected ways. Kunakhovich shows that after the top-down dogmatism of Stalinism was gone, it was the audience’s reactions (something that a censor could not predict) that worried the authorities the most. With time, as the criteria of what passed for good socialist culture got ever fuzzier, the only thing that would bother the state-sponsored cultural curators was whether the audience’s reaction was not too wild (i.e. too openly, radically or numerous anti-state). In Poland, and to a lesser extent in the GDR, all types of cultural consumption were in principle allowed, as long as they did not cause too much of an anti-regime sentiment among too many people in too open a manner.

Another interesting finding is that, after the end of Stalinism, the regimes were generally on the defensive (i.e. reactionary) in terms of curating culture. After the blunt and failed attempt to re-make all art in the socialist-realist fashion, the regimes were forced to listen to and co-op grassroots tendencies in order to retain any say in the cultural life of their nations. True, outright bans, prison, and expulsion always remained a possibility for any active artist east of the Iron Curtain, but Kunakhovich shows that the regimes did not really like to resort to this harsh method. They wanted to boast a national cultural scene as vibrant and popular as anywhere around the world, and aggressive censorship or manual dirigisme were never going to make it. In a way, the author traces a sinusoid-like feedback loop between cultural life and politics in both countries. Crackdowns were severe, but they were followed by far-reaching laterizations, too. Liberalizations led to diverse and world-class cultural production in both countries, but also eventually precipitated a crackdown again, since there was only so much artistic freedom the regimes (or Moscow, as in the Prague Spring) were able to stomach.

From the 1970s on, the regimes became much less idealistic and more pragmatic, or even commercial, in their cultural policy. They were generally happy if socialist citizens were busy devouring cheap soap operas in their innumerable iterations. It seemed like a more reasonable policy compared with forcing the evidently Sisyphean effort of building a new socialist consciousness. In the end, even the pragmatic policy failed, because, as Kristin Roth-Ey showed in her book *Moscow Prime Time,* the East could never really compete with the West in terms of popular mass culture (think Hollywood blockbusters or the Beatles). Since it had given up the ideological fight earlier, and then lost the pop-cultural consumer, there was little reason why Communist cultural policy, and the regimes it was supposed to promote, should even have existed.

The scope of Kunakhovich’s work owes a lot to Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962).* This theoretical point of departure leads to, in my mind, the only serious problem of the book. Namely, its scope seems to be too wide at times. While it is true that culture was often the only platform left for political activism (other than simply joining the regime), sometimes the flexibility of the term “public sphere” is taken too far. This applies particularly to the “normalized” 1970s and 1980s, when most of the cultural production, as the author himself acknowledges, was effectively de-politicized. Can we recognize watching US Westerns on a home TV set or listening to the Skaldowie (Polish state-sanctioned rock band) on a private radio as acts belonging to the public sphere? True, the author acknowledges the deliberate vagueness of the term “sphere,” but still, I suggest that a narrower focus on either high-culture or popular culture (or visual art/music; official/underground circulation, etc.), would help to bring more analytical clarity and structure to the book. As it is, the narrative sometimes resembles a kaleidoscope of highlights of all kinds of major cultural events that the cities of Kraków and Leipzig hosted at the time.

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Modernist visual art and operettas are often discussed on the same page, and so are East German punk-rock bands and Lutheran theology, consumer preference polls and Polish director Andrzej Wajda’s patriotic epics. My preferred choice would be to see a more limited and thematically (rather than chronologically) focused analysis of the evolution of a more specifically defined form of cultural activity, say: novels or music. True, by casting a wider net, the author excels at delineating broader trends, shifts, and transitions on a macro-societal level. The book also delivers a persuasive account of why the Communist model of cultural sphere was both productive (it stimulated some of the best art we know) and counterproductive (it failed to garner long-term support for the regimes), and why it utterly backfired on the regimes at the end. After all, close to zero culture producers and receivers defended the Communist cause in its terminal stage. At the same time, some of the nuance and attention to specific masterpieces of the period is lost, and there are few new discoveries in the text. However, that was not the purpose of the book, and the author certainly does deliver on the larger analytical claims he promises to prove in the introduction.

Finally, a word on the comparative structure of the book. As the author acknowledges, the point of reference for the GDR was rarely Poland. It was more frequently the USSR, and, most typically, West Germany. The point of reference for Kraków was more usually Paris or Rome rather than Leipzig. The exchanges between the two cities were certainly frequent (they became sister cities in 1973), but this was often przyjaźni nakazana (pre-ordained friendship, a friendship ordered by the state, not genuinely desired by the people). While one cannot change the history of the GDR, with its utter dependence on the German-German context, one could add one more city to the mix, for instance in Czechoslovakia, or, even better, in the USSR (Lviv? Vilnius?). Such a three-legged stool would be more reliable than a two-legged one. In this context, John Connelly’s Captive University, might serve as an example. That being said, the author is well aware of the specificities of both cities and does his best to properly contextualize his findings in the larger regional, or even European, setting.

Kunakhovich’s book does not end with the reunification of Germany. There is a very interesting epilogue that takes the reader right into the twenty-first century. And this is rightly so, because this book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the unique nexus of culture and politics in this part of the world. Kunakhovich’s book offers something valuable for everyone: professional political and cultural historians and theorists, artists, writers, musicians, painters and critics, politicians, and curators. It is also certainly accessible and has a chance to be widely read. It is one of those rare history books that satisfies the highest standards of historical rigor, is innovative methodologically and thematically, has a persuasive, unobvious argument, but is also an exciting read for someone new to the region’s history. Each page brings the uneasy yet thrilling experience of being a policymaker, culture-maker, or an audience member under Communism.

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7 On that note, the author could have perhaps explained his usage of the term “East European” in the book. The reader intuitively understands that he means—Soviet Bloc satellites—but his unqualified usage of the term with respect to the residents of Leipzig might have raised many an eyebrow among them, especially those fonder of the Central European terminology.
back to life, and the reader will find many an opportunity to clap in awe, boo in indignation, or smile along with history’s many ironies that the book lays out before her.
Review by Lukas Dovern, University of Kiel

In *Communism’s Public Sphere*, Kyrill Kunakhovich skillfully tells the story of the cultural scenes in two cities, the Polish Kraków and the East German Leipzig, from the last days of the Second World War to the revolutions of 1989. His account draws on a broad array of primary sources: archival materials as well as newspaper and magazine articles, supplemented with memoirs and, to great effect, cultural products themselves—poems, plays, novels, and paintings. The result is a book replete with captivating details. It follows both artists and local officials who were concerned with culture, documenting substantial overlap between the two groups. To an extent, it even captures the reactions and tastes of potential and actual audiences. When it comes to framing devices, Kunakhovich applies a light touch. He offers enough to imbue details with meaning and to give readers orientation, but specialists in the field can connect the book’s contents to larger conversation about Cold War Eastern Europe upon which the introduction merely touches. Precisely for this reason, the book will make for great discussions in graduate seminars.

Of the few framing devices that Kunakhovich deploys, a central one is Jürgen Habermas’s idea of Öffentlichkeit, or public sphere.¹ Habermas links this idea to the rise of the capitalist bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century western Europe. Central pillars of his public sphere—independent newspapers, civic associations, private property—barely existed in socialist Poland and East Germany. But Habermas’s public sphere is ultimately an ideal type; he might have had eighteenth-century western Europe in mind when he devised it, but in his idealized form it never existed. Kunakhovich therefore takes the liberty of applying the concept to socialist Eastern Europe. He convincingly argues that a public sphere existed there: as the institutions that support the formation of public opinion in liberal democracies—such as the press, political pluralism, and parliaments—were disbanded or brought under control of the ruling parties in the second half of the 1940s, debates about the common good shifted to the realm of culture. While the book’s insights into the cultural scenes of Kraków and Leipzig are fascinating, *Communism’s Public Sphere* is ultimately not about art, but politics.

Kunakhovich follows other scholars who have used Habermas’s public sphere as a lens to study Cold War Eastern Europe,² but he coins his own term—state cultural matrix—to denote the totality of the manifold cultural institutions, administrative structures, physical assets, funding schemes, educational programs, publications, and logistical operations that made up the cultural infrastructures of Kraków and Leipzig. A useful shorthand for these intricate infrastructures throughout the book, the term also highlights one of Kunakhovich’s key interventions: rather than thinking of cultural policy in Cold War Eastern Europe exclusively as restricting, Kunakhovich draws our attention to the immense resources that Communist

regimes in the region mobilized to *enable* cultural production. Of course, government officials sought to impose their own ideas of what cultural products should look like and what ends they should serve, but the book demonstrates the challenges that their endeavors faced and the pressures that forced them to adjust strategies continuously.

If the state cultural matrices of Kraków and Leipzig were geared towards creating a new socialist man under Stalinism, they were used to direct criticism and protest into acceptable channels in the 1960s before developing into instruments of surveillance on the regimes’ opponents in the 1970s. The concept of the state cultural matrix thus challenges the idea of dissidents operating against the state outside of official structures. Kunakhovich effectively shows the binary opposition of dissidents and the state apparatus to be an oversimplification. Artists who were critical of the state often operated within, or grew out of, the state cultural matrix, and close relationships existed between them and local administrators. In 1989, these relationships were crucial in averting violent clashes between protestors and security forces in Leipzig.

In Kunakhovich’s telling, the cultural matrix was a driver of change in socialist Poland and East Germany. He argues that “cultural spaces had an outsized impact on how officials understood the people they ruled” (13). In a context in which no meaningful elections took place and large gatherings of people were either tightly regulated or outrightly banned, the people who attended cultural events were taken to be manifestations of an otherwise elusive public. The evolution that Kunakhovich describes—sometimes as response to developments in the cultural sphere, sometimes mirroring them—follows the common periodization of East European postwar history.³ His story begins in the Stalinist period, which was characterized by mass mobilization and indoctrination. After popular uprisings in East Germany (1953) and Poland (1956), both regimes sought to be more responsive to their society’s cultural sensitivities and political views while still aiming to shape them in their interest. Finally, the 1970s brought consumerism and seemingly apolitical mass entertainment. Communist regimes began to see a politically engaged public not as a goal but a threat. They came up with a new social contract, one that promised material well-being and Western blockbuster movies in exchange for political compliance.

*Communism’s Public Sphere* generally continues trends in the historiography of Eastern Europe rather than going against the current—which is not a bad thing. Kunakhovich makes a valuable contribution to the larger project of writing the history of the region’s socialist societies in a way that does justice to their complexity and dynamism. Leaving behind the totalitarian model as too reductionist, historians have turned to more localized approaches to capture the reality on the ground. Taking readers to, say, the factory floors of a small industrial town in Thuringia,⁴ the muddy construction site of a socialist utopia near

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Kraków, or the prefabricated apartment blocks of Marzahn, they have demonstrated how Communist regimes could not rely on suppression and surveillance alone to maintain their power. Historians have also begun exploring how Eastern Europe shaped, and was shaped by, global trends, tackling such disparate topics as youth culture and international financial and oil markets. Kunakhovich adds further texture with his insightful accounts of the Kraków and Leipzig cultural scenes, which absorbed impulses from each other, the Soviet Union, and the West.

The question of the exact relationship between the two cities—as a historical matter, but also analytically, within the context of the book—is one that Communism’s Public Sphere addresses but only partially answers. Here, Kunakhovich leaves an opening for historians and students of Eastern Europe to leverage the material he presents for discussions that transcend the book’s framing. Kraków and Leipzig became sister cities in 1973, prompting a flurry of mutual visits. Some city officials used these visits as opportunities to discuss the question of how to deal with the opposition in their respective jurisdictions, leading Kunakhovich to conclude that “dissent had become a transnational problem” (186). Artists also observed, and interacted with, their peers in the respective neighboring country. “Within the Eastern Bloc,” Kunakhovich writes, “both public policy and public opinion eclipsed national borders.” The Eastern Bloc was, he suggests, “a transnational public sphere.” Beyond exchange and mutual observation, he also points to “the shared infrastructure of the Eastern Bloc” and the “Moscow Center” to explain parallel developments in Poland and East Germany (15). All these assertions are plausible, but much of Kunakhovich’s narrative follows local events in Kraków and Leipzig so closely that the larger transnational reality remains out of readers’ sight.

In particular, the book does not extensively cover Soviet actions and policies regarding Eastern Europe. We know that Moscow cared a great deal about culture in its expanded sphere of influence in the postwar years. As backdrop for Kunakhovich’s case studies, it would have been interesting to get a systematic assessment as to how Soviet cultural policy towards Poland and East Germany developed in later decades. Kunakhovich writes, for example, about officials in both Leipzig and Kraków who grew concerned about Soviet art in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and his account of their concerns (151–154) demonstrates the strengths of his narrative as well as its limits. He skillfully brings out the differences between his two case studies, showing that Eastern Europe was by no means a monolithic bloc. Leipzig officials were worried


about Soviet art because they clung to Socialist Realism even when de-Stalinization brought abstract paintings back to Soviet exhibitions. Kraków officials, who were aiming to implement Polish leader Władysław Gomułka’s program of a Polish road to socialism, had reservations of a different kind. First, they believed that anti-religious sentiments would not play well with a Polish audience. Second, they were afraid that Soviet art comprising sharp critiques of Stalinism would fuel anti-Soviet sentiment in Poland. Somewhat ironically, the program of a Polish road to socialism—a core promise of which was greater independence from the Soviet Union—depended on Moscow trusting that Poland was a loyal ally. However, Moscow’s perspective on attempts of East German and Polish officials to chart their own course in cultural matters is not part of Kunakhovich’s narrative.

Kunakhovich mentions transnational connections between Kraków and Leipzig as historical fact, but he does not—at least not explicitly—employ a transnational approach to tell the two cities’ stories. In other words, these connections figure in the narrative, but not prominently enough to delineate the scope and focus of the study. All of the book’s chapters cover both Kraków and Leipzig, yet their stories truly merge on only a few occasions. The overall impression remains that of a comparative work. The similarities and differences between the two cities that Kunakhovich thus brings to light are fascinating, but the comparative approach leaves unrealized some of the analytical potential inherent in his strong empirical work. Perhaps an explicit commitment to a transnational approach—or to the approach of entangled history—could have, in a methodologically conscious manner, integrated the local with the regional while also recalibrating our understanding of Soviet and global influences on Eastern Europe.

However, books should be assessed based on the tasks that their authors set themselves, not measured against books that exist only in the reviewer’s imagination. Kunakhovich’s goal was to illuminate the political role that cultural spaces played in the evolution of Eastern Europe’s socialist systems—and here he succeeded brilliantly. Written in lucid prose, *Communism’s Public Sphere* is an important contribution to our understanding of how politics worked in Cold War Poland and East Germany. It deserves a wide readership.
It has now been more than 30 years since the Communist regimes in Poland and East Germany collapsed. Yet while Communist parties no longer hold sway in Eastern Europe, the Cold War has continued to shape how we think about Communism. Outside of academia, the media typically portrays Communist regimes in totalitarian terms—as all-powerful and all-knowing police states which ruled by fear and ruthlessly quashed any hint of dissent, free thought, or creativity. My undergraduate students, who were born more than a decade after 1989, often come to class convinced that Communist Eastern Europe was just like George Orwell’s 1984. Of course, academic historiography has not remained as stuck in time. Since 1989, professional historians have produced a much more nuanced picture of life in Communist Eastern Europe than is often reflected in the wider media. But because the language we rely on to conceptualize Communism is so deeply enmeshed in Cold War frameworks, even professional historians who want to embrace new approaches can find it difficult to not fall back on the same categories they are trying to replace. In *Communism’s Public Sphere*, Kyrill Kunakhovich has taken on the challenging task of writing a history of Communist Eastern Europe that moves beyond Cold War binaries. The book proceeds from what initially seems like a rather narrow remit: it examines state-run cultural facilities (such as museums, concert halls, cinemas, and youth clubs) in two cities—Kraków and Leipzig—from the beginning of Communist rule until its end. But Kunakhovich compellingly shows that these “cultural spaces” provide a unique venue for investigating the interaction of state and society under Communism.

In Communist societies, culture was always political. The state funded cultural facilities because it saw culture as a crucial vehicle for creating a socialist society. Culture was not merely entertainment, but a means of inspiring people to embody socialist values and work for a socialist future. As Kunakhovich notes, most historians have looked at culture in Communist societies in one of two ways—either as a mechanism for indoctrination or a forum for resistance. Underlying both these approaches is a view of a unitary Communist state that wants to impress its will on its citizens, who cave in to its demands or resist them (or do a bit of both). Kunakhovich, however, sees the relationship between state and society differently. Rather than making a distinction between “official” culture and a dissident underground, he argues that both were part of a single cultural public sphere. Cultural policy, Kunakhovich argues, did not simply emanate from the state, but was created through negotiation between government officials, artists, and audiences within this cultural public sphere.

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While the book covers the entire socialist period, its heart is the period of National Communism from 1953–1968. Here, Kunakhovich joins with scholars like Malgorzata Fidelis who have shown that the 1960s were a moment of surprising pluralism and openness within the Communist world (particularly in Poland). Under Stalinism, Kunakhovich argues, both the Polish and East German states pumped money into culture, hoping to use art as a means of inspiring their citizens to work for a glorious socialist future. They wanted workers to not only consume art, but also to produce it, seeing both the consumption and production of culture as means of social transformation. But these policies did not work very well. Most people did not appreciate being bused to the opera without getting a choice in the matter, or having their cultural consumption framed as a political duty. After Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953, culture became a way for both Communist and anti-Communist Poles and East Germans to lodge complaints about the Stalinist system for being too repressive, too regimented, and too Soviet. Culture also gave Communist leaders a way to show that they had listened to those complaints. Under National Communism, state officials determined that they needed to listen to the public and present people with cultural products they actually liked. Officials still hoped to guide the public’s taste into what they saw as the proper channels, but they nonetheless began to take people’s preferences seriously. In short, they began to treat audiences more like consumers and to recognize that they had choices.

In much of the literature on Communism in Eastern Europe, the turn to consumerism is linked to political apathy. Communist governments, the story goes, let people focus on getting more stuff or having more fun as a way of keeping them quiet and out of politics. Kunakhovich, however, argues that at least before 1968, Communist leaders saw “offering variety and choice” as a means of encouraging more participation in the state rather than less (154). It was this conviction that led Polish officials to allow the establishment of domestic rock bands starting in the late 1950s. Indeed, Polish officials didn’t just tolerate the new music, they helped create enthusiasm for it by organizing contests to find new artists and publicizing bands on the radio and television. The case of the rock band the Skalds is a particularly good example of Kunakhovich’s argument that cultural policy was the product of negotiation between officials, artists, and audiences. The Skalds were a group of classically trained musicians whose songs were influenced by Polish folk traditions. Polish music critics and state officials championed them as a perfect Polish counterpoint to Western rock bands, promoting them on state media channels even when early audiences were not enthused. However, the fact that Polish officials were promoting a rock band at all reflected the fact that they had paid attention to what young people wanted and taken their desires seriously. And while the Skalds benefitted from their state-sponsored musical training and media exposure, they were independent musicians who, Kunakhovich notes, took as much influence from Western prog rock as Polish folk music.

One of the virtues of the book is how it manages to capture the diversity both between and inside different countries while also making a compelling argument about the evolution of East European Communism more generally. For example, we see how in the later 1950s, Poland cut cultural spending dramatically while

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East Germany increased it. Polish officials decided that they would regulate artists but no longer tell them what to do, while in the GDR the state pushed artists to take workers as their inspiration. But Kunakhovich is able to show that despite these significant differences both states followed similar trajectories in the transition to National Communism and beyond. These larger arguments, however, come at the expense of the local story. While the archival basis for the book is centered around Kraków and Leipzig, the two cities serve primarily to illustrate Kunakhovich’s larger arguments about Poland, East Germany, and the Soviet bloc as a whole.

Throughout the book, Kunakhovich emphasizes the ways in which both the East German and Polish governments were dynamic rather than static, willing to evolve and change. For example, in East Germany, officials were at first highly suspicious of rock music. Then in 1963, following the same logic as the Poles, they reversed course, hoping that embracing rock would help engage more youth. Then in 1965 they cracked down: in Leipzig, dozens of popular bands were banned. The resulting protest only helped fuel Erich Honecker’s rise to power (he would succeed Walter Ulbricht as party leader in 1971). Yet by the 1970s, Honecker’s government had changed its tune. East Germany began to register DJs and rock bands, allowing them to play legally; even punk groups received legal status. In Leipzig, city officials sponsored a breakdancing competition and booked bands with names like Funktaxi and the United Break Crew. One way to interpret this shift in policy would be that the East German state was using popular music as a way to co-opt young people. Kunakhovich does not deny that East German officials wanted to bring youth into contact with the state. Nonetheless, he suggests, it was significant that the East German state listened to its public and adapted its policies in response to what it heard, even when this required straight-laced city bureaucrats to attend events like a punk concert in a Leipzig gallery where the band members exulted in just being loud.

Communist governments did not just censor cultural production, they also funded it. One of the most interesting facets of the book is how cultural policy evolved in relationship to economic concerns. While the GDR prioritized cultural spending more than Poland did (at least during the period of National Communism), in both countries offering the public greater cultural choice meant competition and the need to consider markets, demand, and the bottom line. In Poland after 1956, artists had trouble finding jobs. No longer guaranteed the busloads of workers who had filled their seats during the Stalinist period, theaters and concert halls found themselves under new pressure to sell tickets. In the 1960s, both Kraków and Leipzig cinemas were flooded with Western movies, precisely because audiences were willing to pay to see these films. In the 1970s, Kunakhovich suggests, some artists in both countries became disillusioned with the state, not because it censored them but because it drained their funding in favor of housing and popular entertainment. The book might have more explicitly thematized how financial constraints—and

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Kunakhovich argues that Polish and East German governments pursued Western film imports because it was financially advantageous. Yet Western films were presumably a drain on the state’s hard currency reserves, something not offset by ticket sales in local currency. This raises questions about how profit was calculated or perceived by different actors within the state, ranging from cinema operators to municipal cultural officials or Ministry of Culture bureaucrats. Thanks to Harold Gabel for his insight on this issue. See Harold Gabel, “Poland’s Europe: A Social History of Poland and its ’West,’ 1953–83,” (PhD dissertation, Rutgers University, in progress).
market thinking more generally—shaped attitudes towards culture on the part of officials, artists and audiences.

One of the ways the Cold War continues to influence the ways historians think about Communism is that we often think the most important thing to understand about Communist states is how they repressed people. What makes *Communism’s Public Sphere* refreshingly innovative is that Kunakhovich is interested in thinking about what Communist governments hoped to accomplish through culture, not just how they censored or regulated it. By doing this, we are able to see Communist governments not just as repressive institutions, but as dynamic systems that saw value in funding jazz clubs, registering rock bands, and judging breakdancing competitions. As the book compellingly shows, if cultural spaces formed a public sphere under Communism, it was not in spite of Communist governments, but because of them.
Kyrill Kunakhovich’s excellent book on the “cultural matrix” of Communist societies in Poland and East Germany explores important dimensions of culture and politics in East Central Europe, from the end of World War II until the fall of Communism. Kunakhovich narrows his comparative lens by focusing on the two “second cities” of Poland and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Kraków and Leipzig, moving effortlessly between cultural politics in those cities, countries, and the “Soviet bloc” itself. His comprehensive archival work and deep reading in the literature, poetry, and theater produced in Kraków and Leipzig lend credence to his attempt to demonstrate that the cultural matrix—comprised of party politics towards cultural organizations: music associations, art galleries, youth clubs, theater associations, art galleries, artistic journals, etc.—was a vibrant, elastic, and ultimately creative dimension of socialist society. (Much more could have been made of film and the film industry in both the GDR, the Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) especially, and Poland.) Despite censorship, periodic crackdowns by the government, and the victimization of dissident artists, culture served the needs of the Poles and Germans who fell into the matrix. Socialist culture and its institutions helped build these societies, and, in the end, provided their subject citizenries with the ability to express their needs and frustrations in an otherwise generally stultifying political environment. Just as the political systems used culture to inculcate the people of Poland and East Germany with socialist values, the people were able to influence political power through culture. At times, the work is a little too complimentary of the accomplishments of the cultural sphere in Communist East Central Europe. But the author is a fair reader of party documents and cultural products, and his interpretations are supported by the evidence he musters.

Kunakhovich provides the reader with a careful chronological rendering of the various periods of the cultural history of postwar Poland and East Germany, the first running from the end of the war until 1949/1950 and the onset of the distinctively Stalinist matrix. In this early period, the Communist party treated culture as a crucial facet of the building of People’s Democracies and the formation of an engaged and productive population. In the second, Stalinist period, 1949/1950–1953/1954, the cultural matrix was focused on the enforcement of Stalinist Socialist Realism, which was seen as a crucial pillar, modelled on Soviet form and content, of the edifice of Communist rule. Here, artists were inveighed upon to promote heroes of labor and positive images of working people. Factories, writes Kunakhovich, “turned into centers of artistic life” (41). This began to break down with Soviet leader Josef Stalin’s death in March 1953. The liberalizing tenets of Moscow’s “New Course,” as well as the challenges of the East German uprising of June 1953 and the “Polish October” in 1956, put an end to cultural Stalinism and inaugurated the third period of what Kunakhovich calls “National Communism” (74). He sees the coming to power of Polish leader Władysław Gomułka in October 1956, which strongly resonated with the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, as the high point of National Communism in the history of the cultural matrix. In this phase, which lasted roughly until 1970, cultural producers become competitors, if not partners, with cultural officials. No longer was the process a primarily top-down one, but rather involved the artists themselves in the forging of national identity and purpose. There was still censorship and occasional political repression in the cultural sphere, but the relationship between the artistic production and the political authorities invigorated both. Interestingly, while discussing the democratic character of National Communism, Kunakhovich is less attuned to the development in this same period of a form of integral nationalism—Communist
nationalism—that led the Polish People’s Republic into antisemitic and militarist policies in the late 1960s and the GDR into its own particular East German forms of antisemitism and nationalist display of the early Erich Honecker years, deriving from his policies of Abgrenzung.

The fourth phase of the Communist cultural matrix was initiated in good measure by the failure of the respective East German and Polish systems to respond to the economic needs of their dissatisfied populations. In the East German case, Walter Ulbricht’s New Economic System proved a failure, with the GDR falling further behind the prosperous, booming economy of the Federal Republic of Germany, which was increasingly obvious to East German citizens who were able to watch Western television and interact with, even sometimes visit, relatives on the other side of the border. West German visits to the GDR further exacerbated the differences in standards of living. The Polish case was even more dramatic, as Gomulka sought to relieve the intense pressure on the Polish budget by eliminating subsidies on food prices, which in turn set off spiraling costs of foodstuffs and everyday items for Polish citizens. Workers in the coastal industrial city of Gdańsk erupted in protests in December 1970 which spread to other northern Polish cities and around the country. Gomulka was removed from power and replaced by the managerial expert, Edward Gierek. Both Gierek and Honecker introduced a new phase in the history of the cultural matrix by focusing on the economic and social benefits of “real existing socialism” that was characterized by borrowing from the West in the case of Poland and by large, indirect subsidies from Bonn in the case of the GDR. Both leaders reduced the party’s attention to the cultural matrix and left artists and literary figures to fend for themselves. No longer a “privileged caste,” writes Kunakhovich, “artists increasingly felt like second-class citizens, neglected by the state and stifled in their careers. Shrinking budgets angered Communism’s supporters and gave fodder to its critics, transforming cultural spaces into breeding grounds of dissent” (213.)

This sidelining of the cultural intelligentsia inaugurated the final phase of the cultural matrix in what Kunakhovich calls “Spaces of Opposition, Spaces of Dialogue” (215). Along with leaders of the Polish working-class in the seaport cities, Polish artists and intellectuals became pillars of the Solidarity movement, which, beginning in 1980 created an alternative public sphere that disrupted the ability of the Communist Party to control the cultural matrix. The Catholic Church and intelligentsia groups like KOR (Komitet Obrony Robotników, the Workers’ Defense Committee) and SKS (Studencki Komitet Solidarności, the

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Student Committee of Solidarity), both of which were particularly active in Kraków, seized the cultural initiative from the party and provided institutional structures for theater, art, music, and literature. The GDR developed into a “niches society,” which fragmented on the one hand, but where “diverse groups pursued their own interests under the state’s protective umbrella, thanks to the SED’s [Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, Socialist Unity Party] concerted strategy of integration” (220).

Communism’s Public Sphere is a most welcome and highly readable book on an insufficiently explored area of scholarly investigation. The comparative method works nicely to elucidate important similarities (and differences) in the cultural matrix of Poland and the GDR and the relations between them. But the book still leaves the reader with some unanswered questions. In comparing Leipzig and Kraków, sister cities after 1973, one wonders whether the special historical character of the cities themselves influenced their cultural history under Communism. Leipzig, after all, was the home of the Leipzig Book Fair, which surely opened its citizens to Western influences more than, for example, Dresden or Chemnitz, which were also major population centers in Communist-ruled Saxony. The fair dated from the medieval period and for centuries attracted throngs of book lovers from all over Europe, not to mention the GDR in the Communist period. Leipzig’s long, deep, and distinguished traditions of classical music must have influenced the powerful role that the Gewandhaus orchestra and concert hall and its famed conductor Kurt Masur had on the relationship between the SED and the city’s cultural intelligentsia and population. In fact, Kunakhovich begins the book with an evocative account of Masur’s and the Gewandhaus’s crucial role in mediating between the authorities and the Leipzig citizenry during the October 1989 demonstrations. As Kunakhovich mentions in passing, Leipzig was occupied by the American army for six weeks before being turned over to the Soviets by prior agreement in early July 1945. The Americans engaged in their own distinctive forms of de-Nazification, political transformation, and cultural policy, not to mention the removal of German technical equipment and specialists in part to deny them to the Soviets. Did this brief interlude with the “Amis” and with German Social Democrats and middle-class politicians as leaders have any subsequent effect on the political and cultural world constructed by the Soviets and their German allies in the city?

One could also ask similar kinds of questions about Kraków, versus, for example, Warsaw or Lublin. As Kunakhovich notes, Kraków was not destroyed by the Nazis during their retreat or by the Soviets in their advance, leaving a living, breathing, palpable monument to a formidable Polish past that the Communists found impossible to ignore. The new Stalinist city, Nowa Huta, which Kunakhovich discusses in detail, would always be an inferior architectural and cultural embodiment of the “real” Poland to the citizens of the city. How did this striking aspect of Poland’s “second city” influence the cultural nexus that is so central to Kunakhovich’s narrative? What about the city’s late nineteenth-century traditions of conservatism, bound up with the Catholic Church, the special Polish role in the Habsburg Empire, and the so-called Stańczyki, the notable circle of conservative intellectuals that dominated Kraków’s intellectual life after the 1863 insurrection? In the Communist period, Catholic intellectuals in the city gathered around the

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important journal, *Przegląd Powszechny (Universal Weekly)*, maintaining ties to emigre Polish Catholic circles in Paris, Brussels, and elsewhere in the West. Here, too, one might suggest that the particularities of Kraków’s past weighed heavily in the ability of its artists and writers to negotiate the realities of Communist strictures. That these and other questions emerge with the reading of Kunakhovich’s book is a tribute to the skill with which he has engaged an intriguing set of problems in the history of postwar Europe.

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Response by Kyrill Kunakhovich, University of Virginia

In a celebrated short story, Jorge Luis Borges imagined a novel as a “garden of forking paths,” where each turn opened countless possibilities.1 Perhaps this holds for academic books as well. Every decision on geography, chronology, and scope leads an author down one path rather than others, but roads not taken still live on, at least in the author’s imagination. In their generous and insightful comments, all five reviewers—Patryk Babiracki, Tomasz Blusiewicz, Lukas Dovern, Melissa Feinberg, and Norman Naimark—invite me to consider how different my book might look if I had made some different choices. I am profoundly grateful to them, as well as to the team at H-Diplo—above all Seth Offenbach and Diane Labrosse—and to Malgorzata Fidelis, who wrote the introduction to this forum. It is a pleasure and a privilege to discuss my book with those whose work I so admire.

*Communism’s Public Sphere* explores the political role of cultural spaces in the Eastern Bloc, using the lens of two cities: Kraków in Poland and Leipzig in East Germany. Under Communist regimes that banned free speech, spaces of art—theaters, galleries, concert halls, youth clubs—turned into outlets for political debate. I argue that they came to constitute a public sphere, in which many actors contested visions of the common good. I also make the case that this was a transnational public sphere. Poles and East Germans constantly watched, interacted with, and learned from one another, helping to forge an integrated Eastern Bloc. The reviewers ask me to revisit three key categories in this story: “culture,” “city,” and “Bloc.”

Culture is famously hard to define, and the reviewers wonder about its scope in my book—as well as its role in Communist politics. Blusiewicz suggests “a narrower focus [on] a more specifically defined form of cultural activity, say: novels or music.” This was in fact what I had planned to do when I set out for the archives. My initial aim was to explore how state officials understood the notion of socialist culture, and I envisioned thematic chapters on socialist theater, socialist painting, and so on. As many excellent studies have shown, focusing on one genre can illuminate both change over time and the complex relationship between state and society.2 It can also sharpen comparison across national borders and highlight linkages across the Iron Curtain.3 In diving deeper into poetry or musicals, I might have better articulated the differences between Poland and East Germany or taken better stock of Communism’s cultural imprint.

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Instead, what I found in the archives sent me on a different path. I realized that officials constantly argued over the meaning of socialist culture, which should have come as no surprise. What did stand out is that they based their arguments on audience response—when viewers clapped, when they booed, when they did not show up. Indeed, working with audiences was administrators’ primary task. As much as they tended to artists, city officials spent more time scheduling buses to take workers to the opera and staging concerts for construction brigades. I came to see that cultural policy was a social project that focused more on shaping people than producing art. It is this project that I tried to capture in my book, illuminating “what Communist governments hoped to accomplish through culture,” as Feinberg aptly puts it. Doing so requires looking beyond particular genres, but also entails overlooking a great deal of cultural activity. Norman Naimark is right to note that “much more could have been made of film and the film industry,” and one could say the same of any genre. The portrait of cultural life that emerges in my book is necessarily broader than it is deep; readers can judge for themselves whether the tradeoff is worth it.

If Blusiewicz finds my scope “to be too wide at times,” other reviewers wonder if it is wide enough. Feinberg suggests engaging more with economics: “how financial concerns—and market thinking more generally—shaped attitudes towards culture.” Babiracki questions how central culture really was “in the story of East European rebellions,” noting the “significance of economic shortages.” Naimark, too, considers my analysis “a little too complimentary of the accomplishments of the cultural sphere,” in part because it neglects phenomena like antisemitism and “integral nationalism” in the Eastern Bloc. These comments underline the challenge of demarcating culture as a field of study. Cultural life is always intertwined with politics and economics, so there is little hope of isolating its significance. Instead of trying to put culture in its place, we can explore the different places where it operates—and here the reviewers point out many roads not taken. I chose to look at state-run cultural institutions, but these were not the only sites of culture in the Eastern Bloc. I might have studied public spaces such as streets and squares, exploring the cultural manifestations of protests over shortages. I might have considered churches or military barracks—or print media—to trace the emergent culture of integral nationalism. That certain


economic and political phenomena were left out of my story is not an indication of the limits of the cultural sphere. Rather, it is an invitation to adopt a broader lens.

Defining “city” poses no special challenge, although interpreting cities does. Kraków and Leipzig were—and are—singular spaces with distinctive histories, but also part of national, regional, and even global stories. What are we really studying when we study them, and what conclusions can we draw? Here the reviewers differ in their reading of my book. For Feinberg, “the two cities serve primarily to illustrate Kunakhovich’s larger arguments about Poland, East Germany, and the Soviet Bloc as a whole, [so] larger arguments…come at the expense of the local story.” For Dovern, on the other hand, “much of Kunakhovich’s narrative follows local events in Kraków and Leipzig so closely that the larger transnational reality remains out of readers’ sight.” None of the reviewers questions my decision to focus on cities, or even the specific choice of Kraków and Leipzig—which, at least to Blusiewicz, “makes perfect sense.” As they point out, though, one can write about these cities in entirely different ways.

One way would foreground local specificities, framing the city as the unit of analysis. That is perhaps what Naimark has in mind when he asks “whether the special historical character of the cities themselves influenced their cultural history under Communism.” Leipzig, after all, differed from “Dresden or Chemnitz,” just as Kraków’s experience diverged from “Warsaw or Lublin.” To what extent did each city’s “particularities,” Naimark wonders, shape “the ability of its artists and writers to negotiate the realities of Communist structures”? The answer, surely, is quite a lot, and my book might have placed more stress on each city’s historical character. In fact, the dissertation on which it is based opened in 1918 in order to underscore the endurance of urban traditions across political divides. Many excellent works do something similar, using a city focus to explore local experiences, cultures, and identities.

I hope that these still feature in my book, but also that Kraków and Leipzig can tell us something bigger about Poland and East Germany. True, they are hardly representative of their countries, not least because they are cities. At the same time, they were deeply enmeshed in national structures and politics, like any city in the modern world, and especially under thoroughly centralized Communist regimes. Leipzig functioned differently from Dresden or Chemnitz, but they were all subject to policies made in Berlin, and also had the power to influence those policies. One of my goals was to reconstruct the interplay between local and national: to show how the opinions of Kraków moviegoers came to be quantified as Polish public opinion, or how the banning of a Leipzig rock band contributed to leadership change in East Germany. In this sense, what we see at the city level is not just local history but national history, too.

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To what extent is it also transnational, or regional, or global history? Just how far can the conclusions of a two-city study extend? That is the third big question the reviewers raise. Although my study focuses on Kraków and Leipzig, it makes some claims about the Eastern Bloc as a whole—notably that this was a transnational public sphere. I trace extensive contacts between the two cities and show that residents of both paid close attention to events across the Polish-German border, as well as elsewhere in the Bloc. Several reviewers ask what more I could have done and suggest avenues for future research.

Blusiewicz proposes adding “one more city to the mix, for instance in Czechoslovakia, or, even better, in the USSR,” mentioning Lviv and Vilnius in particular. “Such a three-legged stool,” he writes, “would be more reliable than a two-legged one.” Indeed, when I was planning this project in graduate school I considered comparing Kraków and Lviv, along with adding a third city like Wrocław. The growing number of three-legged studies of the Bloc clearly validates this approach. Adding a Soviet case might help me differentiate between Eastern Europe and the Eastern Bloc, two categories that, as Blusiewicz points out, I use interchangeably. Even more interesting might be to add a city from beyond the Bloc, for instance Zagreb, Beijing, or Havana. This would not only introduce another category, the socialist Second World, but also open infinite forking paths—including one leading to Borges’s own Buenos Aires.

Dovern observes that a third state always loomed over Poland and East Germany: the USSR. He therefore calls for a more “systematic assessment as to how Soviet cultural policy towards Poland and East Germany developed.” I have used a similar approach in some of my other work, following scholars such as Babiracki. Adding this element to my book would certainly shed light on the dynamics of the Bloc, as well as on the porous, malleable nature of national cultures. The challenge is that Soviet influence was mostly exercised through central offices in Warsaw and Berlin; incorporating it into my story would somewhat displace the Kraków-Leipzig comparison. Dovern, though, sees this as a positive. “The comparative approach leaves unrealized some of the analytical potential” in my book, he writes, noting that “perhaps an explicit commitment to a transnational approach—or to the approach of entangled history—could have, in a

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methodologically conscious manner, integrated the local with the regional while also recalibrating our understanding of Soviet and global influences on Eastern Europe.”

Dovern is surely right. Recent transnational research has opened new perspectives on the structure of the Bloc, as well as on its contacts with the West and with the Global South. I, too, have tried to achieve something similar in my work. But are transnational methods preferable to comparison? Does the comparative approach really lack analytical potential? I think not. For all the transfers that took place between Kraków and Leipzig, there was much more that stayed in place. To capture the experience of living in these cities, or in any others, we must consider not only transnational flows but also rooted local, national, and regional identities. Comparison invites reflection on what is typically taken for granted, casting old certainties in a new light. It is not only complementary to transnational research but indispensable for it. My book is one attempt to balance these two methods, yet there were many forking paths I did not take, for better or worse. I can only hope that other scholars will tread some of those paths in the future.
