

Final report

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Project's title:

Dead bodies of the enemies of the system. A necro-aesthetic analysis of Eastern European propaganda materials from the 1940s and 1950s.

General overview:

During the first years after World War II, death was a universal experience. Horror and dread of death accompanied the humanity not only during the war years but also later. Memories of death were still vivid but also consolidation of the communist power in the Eastern Block has cost the life of many people. This project centers the phenomenon of the dead bodies of the communist opponents during the early stage of the Cold War within the Soviet Russia and its satellites. The aim of the project is to analyze the way of constructing the image of the enemies of communism in the 1940s and 1950s through the image and descriptions of their dead bodies, present in press (subordinated and controlled by the state) to explain the visually effective dimension of the discussed materials. The study describes the attitude of communist system towards the dead body and relationships between the political authority and those subordinated to the state, to reveal the power's relationships. Alexei Yurchak and Claudio Lomnitz stated that dead body can be understood as an agent to show the nature of power and authority and the contradictions inscribed in it, but also mechanisms of belonging. The scholars perceive death as existing outside the power relationships, what makes it an ideal lens to track the construction of power. The study is based on the methodological framework of necroaesthetic and focuses on examination of affective response to the dead body during the 1940s and 1950s in the Soviet Block. As Yurchak and Lomnitz claimed, dead body as the signifier of the death – surrounded by the existential enigma –rituals and procedures related to the burial constitute the symbolic space of subconscious manifestation of repressed elements of the order of reality. This creates an opportunity to show what is behind the propaganda picture and reveal the incoherence of the system.

Materials:

Dead bodies of opponents of communism from 1940s and 1950s were presented and/or discussed in press during four different time spans: during the initial phase of the Cold War, the Khrushchev Thaw, around 1968 and during the 1980s – era of the collapse of communism. Materials from these periods constitute the scope of this research. Analyzed materials included Records of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty Research Institute from various units: Polish, Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, Soviet and

from East Germany. Materials studied were scattered in various folders (detailed list attached below) devoted to criminals, espionage, intelligence, punishments, war graves, show trials and propaganda. Useful materials were found in archival boxes devoted Józef Światło (former agent of The Ministry of Public Security of Poland, who escaped during the 1950s to the west and betray the communist state) and Jan Masaryk (well-known political figure, reluctant towards communism, who died under mysterious circumstances during the 1940s). Materials used for further analysis consists of press clippings and reports developed by Radio Liberty Research Institute. Scope of studied materials also consists of video materials by Black Box collective devoted to the exhumation and reburial of Imre Nagy and martyrs of 1956 Revolutions in Hungary.

Results:

Research brought two different types of findings. The issue of dead body of the communist opponents was raised in the media in connection with:

- show trials and capital punishments for betrayal of the communist state
- death or execution of political figures of the era, reluctant toward communism.

Press widely presented profiles of suspects in the crimes punishable by death and convicts. Trials attracted media attention, but information about the execution was almost absent. In Soviet Russia information about execution has never been discussed in media and the silence has surrounded sentenced to the capital punishment immediately after the results of the trial were announced. In other countries of the Soviet Block short information about executions were appearing from time to time in the media but were significantly shorter and less detailed than articles issued during the trials. This imbalance of media interest demands explanation and further analysis. Also, some cases of illegally convicted were presented in press during the periods of weakening the communism. It shows the attitude of the state towards sentenced to the death. Imbalance of information, differences between extensive reports from the trial room and short or lacking information about the executions, reveals the modus operandi of the communist state. From the perspective of the press records and its construction, it turns out that the act of killing the enemies of the state is less important than the trial. The justification of the status of the enemy plays primal role in press (controlled by system of political propaganda) and reframes executions as not related to the elimination of the political obstacles but as connected to the acts of establishment of state's harmony.

Political figures killed by the state or allegedly killed by the state constitutes a second group of interesting and worth analyzing examples. Circumstances of some deaths were highly discussed in state-controlled media but also emigree journals, as in case of Jan Masaryk – only non-communist Czechoslovakian ministry during the 1940s. Czechoslovakian press reported simultaneously that

Masaryk was killed by NKVD, died in unfortunate accident, or committed suicide. All versions were well proven by testimonies of credible witnesses, scientific proofs and even pictures (including pictures from the Masaryk's funeral). Ambiguity created in media seems to show the confusing nature of communism, its incoherence and opposing interests of the state and the individual - thus revealing one of the major conflicts inscribed into the doctrine of communism.

The way the bodies of well-known anti-communist opponents were buried after the execution (example of Imre Nagy and martyrs of 1956 Revolution in Hungary and Polish doomed soldiers) shows several ways of humiliation of the dead body and willingness to cover their tracks. Sophisticated changes of names in the cemetery records, from male to female, served not only hidings the graves but also reveal sexist method of after death humiliation. Scattering the mortal remains and mixing it with the bones of animals seem to unveil the anthropocentric attitude of the system.

Research held at Open Society Archive in 2022 allow me to point out aspects of communist regime that are overlooked in existing state of knowledge. Analysis revealed contradictions that existed within the communist system and its anthropocentric, sexist nature that continues the patterns of power established at the beginning of the 20th century.

Detailed list of archival materials considered during the research and analytical works.

Materials of Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute:

a) From the Polish Unit:

- call no. 300-50-1:161 Freedom of Speech / Wolność słowa, Opposition / Opozycja, 1951 – 1953
- call no. 300-50-1:430 Party propaganda / Propaganda partyjna
- call no. 300-50-1:838 Arrests of foreign interview agents: the trial of priests in Krakow / Aresztowania agentów obcych wywiadów: Proces księży w Krakowie
- call no. 300-50-1:839 Amnesty / Amnestia
- call no. 300-50-1:844 Political discrimination / Polityczna dyskryminacja
- call no. 300-50-1:930; 300-50-1:931; 300-50-1:932; 300-50-1:933: War graves
- call no. 300-50-1:2016 Criminal
- call no. 300-50-3:8 Polonia Wolnego Świata
- call no. 300-50-6:1, 300-50-6:2 ; 300-50-6:3 ; 300-50-6:4: Program Transcripts and Background Material related to Józef Swiatlo

b) From the Soviet Unit (Soviet Red Archive):

- call no. 300-80-1:583: Punishments: coercive labour
- call no. 300-80-1:584: Punishments: death sentence: general
- call no. 300-80-1:585: Punishments: death sentence: death penalty
- call no. 300-80-1:1169: Espionage: Soviet spies in the West

c) From the East German Unit:

- call no. 300-3-1:30: Justice: Show trials
- call no. 300-3-1:18: Exile: Anti-Communist Propaganda

d) From Czechoslovak Unit

- call no. 300-30-19:86: Jan Masaryk

Video materials:

- call no. 305-0-3: Ceremony and Reburial of Imre Nagy on Heroes' Square and Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery, Imre Nagy's Funeral Ceremony on Heroes' Square and in Rákoskeresztúr Cemetery
- call no. 305-0-2: Exhumation of the Martyrs of 1956