



Book Review

Krzysztof Tomasiak, *Gejereł: Mniejszości Seksualne w PRL-u* [Gejereł: Sexual Minorities in the People's Republic of Poland], Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej: Warszawa, 2012; 384 pp.: ISBN 13: 978 83 62467 54 9

The term 'Gejereł' that serves as title of this study is a wordplay. It inscribes the word 'gej' (gay) into the official abbreviation of the People's Republic of Poland (PRP, 1952–1989; the Polish version of the abbreviation is PRL and is read as something like 'payerel'). The neologism accurately sums up the content of Krzysztof Tomasiak's book, which discusses a great many references to homosexuality and transgenderism in Polish pop culture produced under communist rule. While in the introduction and first chapter Tomasiak explores the issue of homosexuality in the PRP's political life, all following chapters focus on the analysis of particular texts of mass culture that more or less explicitly refer to homosexuality or transgenderism. The author examines an impressive number of Polish court coverages, books, films, reviews of foreign films screened at international film festivals, diaries of Polish immigrants as well as memoirs by Poles who survived Nazi concentration camps or Soviet gulags. The majority of the presented cases deal exclusively with gay men. This is a result of the author's focus on the PRP's public discourses, which seem to have been more preoccupied with gay men than any other sexual or gender minority groups. Still, the author also dedicates two chapters to the analysis of scarce sources that refer to lesbians and trans* people.

The book offers a veritable treasure trove of information about the range of attitudes towards gay men, lesbians and trans* people, as well as the challenges experienced by those groups and individuals in the PRP. From Tomasiak's investigations we learn, among many other things, what were the subtle, gender-inflected codes for gayness in Polish cinema produced under communist rule, such as effeminacy, declared misogyny or a keen interest in ancient Greece, fashion or ballet (Chapter 4). Together with the author, we follow press reports about the emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic published in the 1980s, and learn that even though the topic was not widely discussed in public discourses of the PRP, it still occasionally managed to provoke homophobia and racism-fuelled moral panics (Chapter 6). We also obtain insights in the gulag memoirs of a famous Polish philosopher, Barbara Skarga, who rather shockingly identified lesbianism as the ultimate sign of the degeneration of humanity in labour camps (Chapter 7). Additionally, throughout the book we encounter interesting accounts of the western world perceived from the PRP's perspective. In the texts selected by Tomasiak, western countries (here mostly the USA, but also Austria, Denmark, France, Sweden, the UK

and West Germany) were usually presented as gay enclaves by Polish gay men themselves, and as degenerate nations by non-gay Polish authors. The latter tended to perceive homosexuality as a foreign novelty, an imported disease, or the decadent hobby of the bored Western bourgeoisie.

As a result of the accumulation of stories about and by the PRP's gay men, lesbians and trans* people, Tomasik successfully rewrites the history of Poland under communist rule, which, as the author points out, 'remains a highly mythologized, and often mendacious, period [of Polish history], usually shown from the perspective of [the 1981–1983] martial law and ZOMO [paramilitary police force in the PRP]' (p. 13). Needless to say, homosexuality and transgender-related stories are usually considered as insufficiently important to be included in the official version of the PRP's history or as insufficiently serious to become a legitimate area of academic inquiry in contemporary Polish historiography. This seems to be also true for other post-communist countries in Europe. As Judit Takacs (2013: 93) recently noted, 'most CEE [Central and Eastern European] countries are characterised by a scarcity of social historical research focusing on the sexual political arrangements of not only the state-socialist past but also the preceding period of social modernisation going back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.' In this light, *Gejeral* proves to be an invaluable and truly unique contribution.

Furthermore, the author, even if only sporadically, goes beyond the writing of a 'minority history', whose laudable but limited aim is to add the stories of sexual and gender minorities to the official history of Poland. Tomasik also rejects the idea of an overnight reconfiguration of Polish society, which is supposed to have happened in 1989 after the fall of the PRP, together with an overnight emergence of sexual and gender minorities or even homosexual or transgender themes in Poland. Supported by the material he collected, Tomasik emphasizes that 'nonnormative sexuality and gender identification have always existed [in Poland] and the only true problem we have is the way in which we construct our historical memory, what we choose to consider as "important" and worth remembering' (p. 11). Thus, the book not only rewrites the heteronormative Polish history of the communist period, but also extends an invitation to reflect on the process of history-making, in particular the history of nonnormative sexualities and gender identifications in European post-communist countries. As a result, *Gejeral* is an important contribution not only for a Polish audience but for all students of sexuality, especially those interested in history, nationalism and/or globalization. We can only hope the book will soon be translated into English, and possibly other languages.

Reference

- Takacs J (2013) Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska (eds) *De-centring western sexualities: Central and Eastern European perspectives* (Farnham: Ashgate 2011, pp. 232). A comment. *Southeastern Europe* 37(1): 89–96.

Lukasz Szulc

University of Antwerp, Belgium