

Book Review: Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines by Lukasz Szulc

In Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines, Lukasz Szulc examines the emergence of Polish gay and lesbian magazines in the 1980s, challenging the perception of LGBT activism as a post-1989 discourse in Central and Eastern Europe. Drawing upon a diverse and rich array of resources, this is a fascinating and convincing study that suggests valuable avenues for future study, while also reminding us of how grassroots activism offers the possibility of instigating real social and political change, writes Aleksandra Gajowy.

Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines. Lukasz Szulc. Palgrave Macmillan. 2017.

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Were homosexual people in the Soviet Bloc completely and effectively shielded from the influx of information from the West? Could – or did – they know about the Stonewall Riots? The emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic? Were they driven to self-organise under the communist regime, or is activism strictly a post-1989 discourse? These are some of the key questions propelling Lukasz Szulc's search for lost histories in *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines*. The somewhat anachronistic, yet historically appropriate term 'homosexual' serves Szulc as an entry point into the debate on activism before its incorporation into an international context of LGBTQ+ narratives (12-13).

Throughout the book, Szulc amasses and interprets a diverse, astonishingly rich selection of resources. While the initial impulse behind the text was an interview with the activist Ryszard Kisiel conducted by the artist Karol Radziszewski in his own *DIK Fagazine*: Before '89, Szulc explores a plethora of archival documents, leafs through multiple magazines and builds on crucial personal interviews. In doing so, he sets out to challenge the prevailing myths about LGBT issues in communist Eastern Europe: namely, the 'homogeneity' and the 'essence' attributed to the region as well as the teleological narrative of the CEE's [Central and Eastern Europe] 'transition' after 1989 from communism to Western ideas of capitalism, democracy and ethics. These are, in turn, all based on yet another myth of the near-total isolation of the CEE during the Cold War, and stem from the dehistoricisation of homosexuality in the region (5). Contesting these narratives, Szulc offers a detailed and unprecedented discussion of both global and local LGBT issues and their complex interrelations.

Global LGBT politics; the impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the formations of LGBT identities; the Westernisation of the LGBT identity politics: these contexts, likely more familiar to an English-speaking reader, serve as Szulc's starting point. He subsequently introduces the historical resources on homosexuality in the Eastern Bloc up until the 1989 system shift. His primary focus, however, is the unexpectedly active gay communities emerging throughout the 1980s in Poland. Women, although occasionally visible in joint activist and publishing endeavours, did not contribute to *Biuletyn/Etap*, and only occasionally to *Filo* (with the exception of Paulina Pilch, whose articles were published there regularly from 1989 (144)). Lesbian narratives prove decidedly more elusive and therefore tangential to Szulc's argument, although, where possible, he draws upon available resources and particularly on his interview with Pilch.

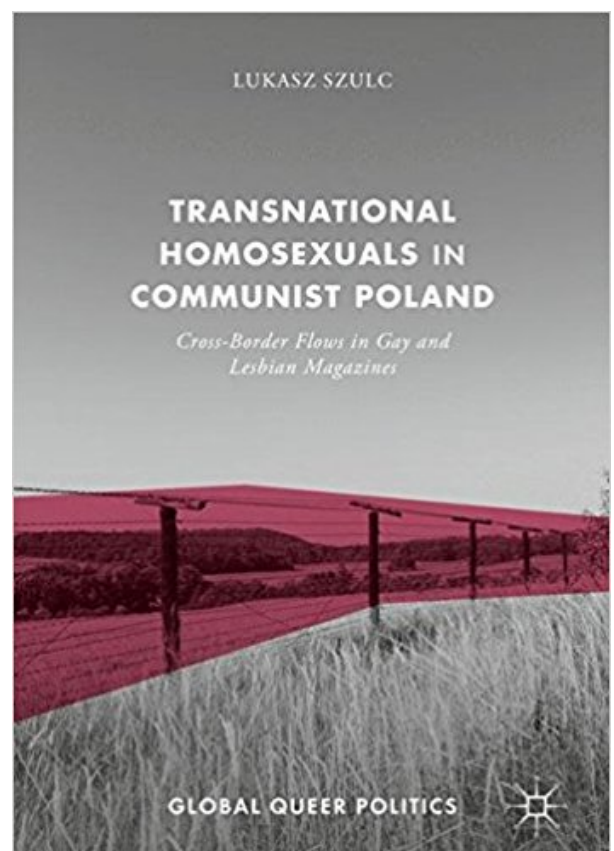




Image Credit: Warsaw Central Station, 1975 ([Radek Kołakowski CC BY 2.0](#))

Across the country, homosexual activists, often working in informal collectivities constructed around various forms of affection and kinship, responded to the palpable need for queer community and the circulation of information, particularly in the context of the devastating reach of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as well as the thousands of homosexual men being arrested and interrogated by the military police in what became known as [Operation Hyacinth](#) (106-11). Szulc focuses on the underground zines printed by these haphazard collectivities as tools of dissidence and for the transmission of crucial, potentially life-saving information. For this, he undertakes a detailed qualitative study of the contents of the Vienna-based *Biuletyn/Etap* magazine, run by the Polish activist Andrzej Selerowicz between 1983 and 1987, and Gdańsk-based *Filo* (1986-1990), founded by Kisiel.

Szulc rejects the essentialising narrative surrounding homosexuality in communist Poland as well as the myths he defines in the introductory chapter; he does not attempt to offer a competing, equally teleological one. Instead, drawing directly from his own analysis of the zines, he focuses on the small-scale, fragmented, sometimes even mundane pieces of the puzzle, which lead him to propose an overview of homosexual identities emerging from *Biuletyn/Etap* and *Filo*. The two zines attempted to reclaim and construct these identities, both individual and collective, and oftentimes transnational, in communist Poland.

Conceptualising the Polish gay communities as counterpublics in their national context, Szulc emphasises the crucial role of cross-border flows of information, which brought about the potentiality of representation for gay men and women, available in media in the West but decidedly scarce in the Soviet Bloc. Drawing on information collected from the magazines, he reconstructs the image of the 'queer cosmopolite': 'young, upwardly mobile, sexually adventurous, with an in-your-face attitude toward traditional restrictions and an interest in both activism and fashion' (178). This, however, risks reading as somewhat essentialising. Although it is clear that this characterisation stems directly from the zines, in the interest of further challenging stereotypical perceptions of homosexuality, particularly in the CEE, I would have at times liked for Szulc to engage in a deeper critique of the identity politics as presented in *Filo* and *Biuletyn/Etap*. For all its assets, if I could wish for even more from *Transnational Homosexuals*, it would be for the volume to also draw upon a broader range of queer theory sources as opposed to primarily only LGBT studies. Application of queer theory could not only further challenge teleological narratives; as constantly in flux, it could in itself be challenged by the newly emerging histories from the margins.

That said, Szulc's book is a much-needed introduction to an emerging field of study – a reliable source of diverse historical records, a go-to volume when researching aspects of homosexuality in communist Eastern Europe and, in itself, certainly a fascinating story. The aims Szulc has set for his book – to challenge the myths of homogeneity of the CEE and absence of homosexual activism prior to the system change in 1989 (211) – are widely addressed and convincingly argued. I was also delighted to see such an extensive consideration of these forgotten and often purposefully obliterated parts of Polish history.

Importantly, Szulc refers to recent literature, which tends to perpetuate the aforementioned myth of 1989 as the ultimate, teleological paradigm shift (5-8). The reading list he provides is invaluable, and the original primary sources abundant. Szulc has also responded to the issue of access by setting up [a website](#) which stores much of the discussed material, as well as fragments of his face-to-face interviews with Kisiel, Selerowicz and Pilch, with English translations.

The breadth of available resources did, however, leave me with questions, the most pressing of which would be 'now what?' Perhaps, then, the most important quality of Szulc's work is precisely that it is not exhaustive. Rather than claim ownership of the field, it invites dialogue, builds momentum and acts as a springboard for future enquiries into social theory, queer theory, gender studies, art history, politics, postcolonial approaches and activism. Moreover, the book's timeliness is of great significance to the political situation in Poland, currently struggling with [more conservative politics and rampant homophobia \(as compared with the rest of Europe\)](#) as well as growing numbers of new HIV cases (there were 1270 new cases reported in 2016, and [the statistics for 2017](#), although only available until July, have already registered 909). Beyond the important lesson in history, Szulc's book is also an auspicious reminder that self-organising and grassroots activism, negligible as they can at times seem, bring about real change through the circulation of information and the strengthening of a sense of belonging.

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Aleksandra Gajowy is a PhD researcher in Art History at Newcastle University. Her doctoral project focuses on representations and ontology of queer body in performance and body art in Poland since the 1970s until present, with particular focus on censorship, Catholic Church and HIV/AIDS narratives. Her research is funded by Northern Bridge Doctoral Training Partnership, the Arts and Humanities Research Council. She regularly presents her research at international conferences such as Association for Art History (Edinburgh, 2016; Loughborough, 2017; London, 2018) and College Art Association (New York, 2017).