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Memory Politics in Polish Samizdat Post Stamps of the 1980s

Final Report for Vera and Donald Blinken
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Project Description:

Madonnas, 19th century uprisings and anti-nazi struggle – Polish Cinderella stamps evoke various historical and national motives. Which historical figures are they portraying as heroes? What events from the past are commemorated? What historical parallels are made? My project investigates emerging politics of memory present in Polish samizdat post stamps from the 1980s. The analysis of iconography of Solidarność' philately aims to describe different strategies used by its creators, to put them in the context of the debates among the opposition and to compare them to the official politics of memory of the time.

This project incorporates visual and discourse analysis and contributes to the research on samizdat publications of Polish democratic opposition. I want to verify my preliminary hypothesis, that samizdat post stamps served as means of creating a visual counter-narrative to the state-run propaganda and that they can be considered memory politics tools. I also aim to reflect on the connection between the strategies and aesthetics of the underground ephemeral prints and contemporary memory politics in Poland.

While Polish samizdats have been analysed and catalogued by many researchers (Grudzińska-Gross 1985, Kobylński 1989, Kowalewski 1998, Remuszko 1992, Sokołowski 1990, Znojkiwicz 1990, Wiczkowski 2003, Zwiernik 2014, Olaszek 2015, Parfianowicz-Vertun 2016), the post stamps issued by the underground are rarely approached. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of the samizdat post stamps issued in the 1980s, but scholars agree on the abundance of the underground ephemera of the period. Historical motives are strongly present in the known collections of the post stamps and depicted subjects are rather diverse (Szychta 2018, Szychta-Mielewicz 2021).

Research at the Open Society Archives:

During my stay at the OSA I used a wide range of archival materials, most importantly, the Polish Underground Ephemera collection (HU OSA 300-55-7). The assemblage of samizdat post stamps is one of the key historical materials for my study. The opportunity to see the originals and work with objects also allowed me to develop reflections on the materiality of the documents I analysed. In the case of samizdat, their materiality – the delicacy, quality and thinness of paper or printing are testimonies of the era – and therefore, above all, testimonies of the difficulties of the times and adversities that printers and creators of the underground experienced and overcame in their work.

I also worked with Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute – primarily with the Polish Unit and Polish Underground Publications Unit. I read media clippings, abstracts and reports related to the production of stamps (official and unofficial) in the Eastern Bloc, as well as materials related to the discussion on commemorations and monuments (Warsaw Uprising, Poznań Crosses etc.) and the lack of recognition of USSR war crimes (Katyn Massacre). Reading the media clippings and samizdats allowed me to dive into the internal discussions within the democratic opposition and their various understandings of Polish history, the national identity and patriotism.

Moreover, during my fellowship I was able to access the resources offered by the OSA Library and CEU Library. I found a large portion of books (both in Polish and in English) related to my research subject (*Sześć lat podziemnej poczty w Polsce (1982-1988)*, Anatol Kobylński; *Kto był kim w drugim obiegu : słownik pseudonimów pisarzy i dziennikarzy 1976-1989*, red. Dobrosława

Świerczyńska; *Zakazana książka. Uczestnicy drugiego obiegu 1977-1989*, Paweł Sowiński; *Books are Weapons. The Polish Opposition Press and the Overthrow of Communism*, Siobhan Doucette; *Solidarność. Analiza ruchu społecznego 1980-1981*, Alain Touraine; *Samizdat : alternative culture in Central and Eastern Europe from the 1960s to the 1980s*; *Samizdat and an independent society in Central and Eastern Europe*, H. Gordon Skilling; *The culture of samizdat : literature and underground networks in the late Soviet Union*, Josephine von Zitzewitz; *Dissident Legacies of Samizdat Social Media Activism. Unlicensed Print Culture in Poland 1976-1990*, Piotr Wscislik). Reading them concurrently while conducting archival research allowed me to contextualise my findings and led to rethink the structure of my project. Being able to consult them while working with historical documents made my endeavours significantly more effective.

Visegrad Fellowship allowed me to explore other institutions located in Budapest. Thanks to my supervisor András Mink's suggestion I contacted the Artpool Art Research Center and conducted my research there. I was able to consult archival materials connected to the Hungarian Mail Art movement of the 1980s (works of the following artists: Júlia Bika, Imre Bak, György Galántai, Farkas Tamás, Dóra Maurer, Endre Tót, as well as samizdat press: *the Artpool Letter* and *the Pool Window*). Delving into Artpool Mail Art archive and comparing Hungarian Correspondence Art with *Solidarność*' stamps helped me sharpen my perspective on Polish Cinderella stamps. It also crystallised my perception of their materiality and technological challenges of the period. Moreover, during my stay in Budapest I was able to visit the Bélyegmúzeum. Seeing their remarkable collections of stamps allowed me to gain a broader historical perspective.

Preliminary Findings:

In my research I distinguished 4 categories of stamps depicting historical and political motives: images dealing (1) with distant history (pre-World War II), (2) with the events of World War II, (3) with recent past (i.e. workers' protests of the Polish People's Republic) and (4) concurrent political events (i.e. portraits of political prisoners from the 1980s). All of them can be considered as a pursuit of establishing a counter narrative to the state-run propaganda.

1. Pre-World War II History

The first group depicts history of Poland and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – one will find references to the partitions, the national liberation struggle (mainly Kościuszko Uprising,

January and November Uprisings) as well as a large number of Józef Piłsudski portraits. This category relies on pre-established national canon and can be seen as an attempt to draw historical parallels but most importantly as a strategy to create a sense of continuity between the well recognised national history and current political reality.

2. World War II

The second category, depicting the World War II events attempts to contradict or negotiate the discourse around the period that had been commemorated and canonised during the Polish People's Republic times. Here, one will observe an abundance of Warsaw Uprising and Home Army motives, but also commemorations of Katyń Massacre or Ghetto Uprising. Another quite prominent topic is the journey of Polish Armed Forces in the West. While all the above mentioned subjects remained unprivileged under the socialist rule, the level of censorship over them varied and this difference is not necessarily reflected in their prevalence.

3. Recent Past

Stamps depicting recent past (post 1945) focus on the history of workers' protests (Ursus, Radom or Poznań protests) and often reproduce the images of monuments to the shot workers (i.e. Poznań Crosses). In some cases the iconography juxtaposes the manifestations and more distant historical events. In this category one will also find stamps portraying events happening outside of Poland – namely series commemorating the 1956 in Hungary, 1981 in Poland, 1968 in Czechoslovakia and 1979 in Afganistan. In each case the stamp is depicting a contour map of the country and a red tank.

4. Concurrent Political Events (1980s)

Designs related to the ongoing political events are self-referential to large extent. They most often use simply the logo of Solidarność or other iconic graphic projects and symbols connected to the democratic opposition. Portraits of political prisoners – most repeatedly issued as larger collections – are also a very prominent motive. They all can be seen as propaganda or as an attempt to historicise the present and to introduce new heroes into the national canon.

Stamps, as objects reflect well the tension between the role of the individual and of the mass movement, the importance of exchange and cooperation, but also the entanglement of the underground world with the public, official one.

Philately created in the 1980s might be seen as an attempt to establish an alternative mnemonic canon but also as a significant commemorative practice. The democratic opposition did not have one coherent position on the issues of memory or national identity. The Cinderella stamps themselves were created in a different, quite spontaneous and certainly unregulated way, so we cannot talk about one defined, established strategy or policy here. However, we can certainly talk about trends or tendencies, sometimes clashing ones. Moreover, the abundance of historical motives among Solidarność samizdat stamps, shows that history and manipulations one it had been seen as a significant part of opposition' politics and propaganda. Both in terms of form and depicted subjects, Solidarność Cinderella stamps are rather diverse – and by this they also reflect the diversity of the democratic opposition of that period.

Conclusions:

My research project is at the initial stage and the Visegrad Fellowship at the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives allowed me not only to work closely with the Polish Underground Ephemera collection but also to further develop the structure of my research project and formulate new research questions. My stay at the OSA was truly inspiring and rewarding, I was able to reach my research goals and to learn from my colleagues – those affiliated with the OSA as well as other Visegrad Fellows. Their numerous reading suggestions, words of care and puzzling questions created an amazing learning environment. I am thankful for the support of the Visegrad Fund and the amazing milieu of OSA team and the fellows.

List of consulted documents:

Call Number	Title
HU OSA 300-50-1:1/5	Anniversaries and Calendars: September 1939 [Invasion of Poland] [1/2]
HU OSA 300-50-1:2/1	Anniversaries and Calendars: Warsaw Uprising
HU OSA 300-50-1:3/1	Anniversaries and Calendars: Warsaw Ghetto Uprising
HU OSA 300-50-1:4/1	Anniversaries and Calendars: 1914-1944

HU OSA 300-50-1:8/1	Anniversaries and Calendars: Anniversaries of Uprisings and Wars
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/1	Stamps: Independent Politics: Solidarity
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/2	Stamps: Independent Politics: Other Polish Groups and Political Prisoners
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/3	Stamps: Independent Politics: Polish Underground Press
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/4	Stamps: Independent Politics: International Dissent and Solidarity Actions
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/5	Stamps: Polish Catholicism
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/6	Stamps: Polish History: National Emblems
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/7	Stamps: Polish History: Józef Piłsudski
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/8	Stamps: Polish History: World War II
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/9	Stamps: Polish History: Postwar Protests
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/10	Stamps: Polish History: Instytut Literacki]
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/11	Stamps: Polish History: "Polskie Miesiące" Series
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/12	Stamps: Miscellaneous
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/13	Envelopes
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/14	Banknotes: US Dollar
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/15	Banknotes: Polish Zloty
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/16	Banknotes: Shares
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/17	Photos: Leaflet Action
HU OSA 300-55-7:1/18	Calendars
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/1	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: Solidarity Propaganda
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/2	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: Wolna Poczta Internowanych [Internees' Free Post]
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/3	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: 1989 Solidarity Electoral Campaign
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/4	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: Anti-Government Propaganda: General
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/5	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: Anti-Government Propaganda: General
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/6	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: Solidarity with Afghanistan
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/7	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: Anti-Solidarity Propaganda
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/8	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: History
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/9	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: Polish Catholicism
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/10	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: Polish Catholicism: Holiday Postcards
HU OSA 300-55-7:2/11	Postcards, Posters and Leaflets: Polish Catholicism: Oversized Items

HU OSA 300-55-9:1/1	Polish Independent Press Review (PIPR) - Profiles of Major Independent Publications
HU OSA 300-55-10:7/47	Censorship
HU OSA 300-55-10:9/1	Dokumenty (dotyczące stosunków państwo-opozycja): Apele i odezwy
HU OSA 300-55-10:12/1	Europa Wschodnia: Dyskusja
HU OSA 300-55-10:14/5	Kobiety
HU OSA 300-55-10:16/1	Komitet Kultury Niezależnej
HU OSA 300-55-10:24/4	Poczta Solidarności. Znaczki
HU OSA 300-55-10:32/6	Sztuka
HU OSA 300-55-10:14/2	Kalendarium Solidarności
HU OSA 300-55-10:29/6	Satyra
HU OSA 300-55-10:31/2	Solidarność Twórców
HU OSA 300-55-10:34/3	Ulotki
HU OSA 300-55-4:61/5	Czkawka
HU OSA 300-55-10:13/7	Jałta
HU OSA 300-2-6:61/1	Light and Food and Textile Industry
HU OSA 300-55-4:23/1	Respublica
HU OSA 300-55-1:1/16	Polish Underground Publications Unit: Overview
HU OSA 300-55-1:1/20	Reference Materials: Polish Independent Politics and Press
HU OSA 300-55-2:3/2	Post-December 13, 1981: Myśli Nieinternowane