



Tom Junes

Between political and apolitical

Youth counterculture in communist Poland

Published 18 June 2015

Original in **English**

First published in **Critique & Humanism 43 (2015) (Bulgarian version); Eurozine (English version)**

Downloaded from eurozine.com (<https://www.eurozine.com/between-political-and-apolitical/>)

© Tom Junes / Critique & Humanism / Eurozine

By 1950, Poland's postwar Stalinist regime was already near the height of its powers. Not that this stopped the emergence of a youth subculture during the ensuing decades. Tom Junes explains how associated movements evolved and even became useful to the Polish government.

This article discusses the various youth subcultures that appeared in Poland under Communist rule. It presents on the one hand an overview of the different subcultures and their characteristics and, on the other, how the regime reacted and dealt with them. Despite the existence of the Iron Curtain, counter-cultural trends were just as much a part of life for Poland's youth as elsewhere in Europe. In fact, the emergence of youth counter-culture in post-war Communist Poland was to a large extent inspired by trends blowing over from the West – in particular from across the Atlantic (Kosinski, 2006: 85-87). The emerging influence of American pop culture was a significant transnational phenomenon, and its endorsement by European youth in general was met with resistance on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in western Europe as well (Judt, 2005: 352-53). Yet the politicization of the Communist regime meant that American influence among the younger generation was seen as particularly dangerous in Poland. It was in fact the regime that was responsible for promoting what were essentially apolitical counter-cultural trends to the level of “hostile” subcultures – even to the point of endowing them with an ideology and a political programme of sorts (Wierzbicki, 2006: 373). This in turn made these subcultures attractive



to those young people who wished to give expression to their defiance. But while the regime's propaganda tended to extrapolate the foreign roots and elements of these subcultures in an effort to depict them as a form of imperialist subversion of the country's youth, the said subcultures nonetheless possessed some specific Polish characteristics. So they differed from their manifestations in the West, despite the strikingly similar appearances.

Notwithstanding the regime's perception of youth counter-culture as a political threat, it did tolerate and even passively encourage elements of youth counter-culture – such as rock music and certain fashion trends – in a bid to distract the younger generation from political activity of a more profound nature. Thus, certain areas of youth counter-culture constituted something of a safety valve for the regime to channel rebellious youthful emotions. However, in allowing for such elements to exist within the Communist system, the regime provided the opportunity for countercultural elements to become part of a more mainstream youth culture and so potentially enhanced their subversive role. Therefore, it can be argued that youth counter-culture in Poland not only represented a mode of resistance to Communist rule by its adherents, but that its influence as a consciousness-raising phenomenon among respective generations of youth constituted an impediment for the regime when trying to win over the “hearts and minds” of the said generations.

The first counter-cultural wave

The Communist regime that would emerge in post-war Poland was set on mirroring the Soviet experience. Somewhere between 1948 and 1950, the Stalinist *Gleichschaltung* was complete. This included a unification of the youth and student organizations into one uniform mass organization, the Związek Młodzieży Polskiej (ZMP – Union of Polish Youth). The totalitarian aspect of this organization entailed that it served not only as the Party's “primary helper” and an instrument for political control of the country's youth, but it was also to imbue the younger generation with the spirit and values of socialism, implying that it would control all aspects of their lives (Wierzbicki, 2006: 30-45). The period of Polish Stalinism that reached its zenith by the 1950s would be characterized by a climate in which the regime aimed to indoctrinate and direct the country's youth according to its own ideological choreography (Jarosz, 2000: 195-217).

Yet it was during the Stalinist era that the first Polish youth subculture emerged. The appearance of counter-cultural trends around this time among

youth was by no means exclusive to Poland, other countries in the Soviet bloc saw similar phenomena such as the so-called *Stilyagi* (Edele, 2002: 37-61). [1] In Poland, the adherents of the corresponding subculture would generally become known as *Bikiniarze* (Bikini-boys). The trademarks of this subculture would be colourful clothes – inspired by the idealized vision of the attire of the inhabitants of the American Bikini Islands which stood in stark contrast with the grey, poor and uniform Stalinist reality – tight pants, high heel boots and of course a complementary characteristic hair style with the hair tightly combed backwards and dubbed a *mandolina* (mandoline cut). These self-styled American-inspired youths preferred to dance the boogie or the rumba than take part in the official and politicized recreational evenings where “traditional” dancing was promoted. The *Bikiniarze* subculture peaked in popularity around 1952 hence some reference was made to a “generation 52” phenomenon (Chlopek, 2005: 34-55). Apart from the *Bikiniarze*, a more straightforward form of defiant youth behaviour developed which was often linked with alcohol abuse. Such youths were dubbed by the regime and the ZMP quite self-explanatory as *Chuligani* (Hooligans) for their non-social behaviour. Again, this form of defiant youth culture was not exclusively typical for the Communist bloc, but it was nonetheless perceived as having blown over from the West for ideological reasons (Wierzbicki, 2006: 379-80). For despite the usual references to a vague and ubiquitous “class enemy” in the Stalinist propaganda, youth subcultures formed a very concrete ideological scapegoat and were therefore targeted by the regime and, by proxy, the ZMP. [2] This ideological struggle at times resounded like a ritualized “witch hunt”, which was meticulously reported on in a most cynical of bureaucratic ways. [3] In its struggle against this supposed “imperialist subversion” by the *Bikiniarze* and *Chuligani*, even physical violence was not eschewed by ZMP activists. Jacek Kuron, who as a student in Warsaw was a ZMP activist and later became one of Communist Poland’s most renowned dissidents, described the brutal way in which adherents of these subcultures were viewed through the official politically correct prism and then treated accordingly:

We struggled against *chuliganstwo* and *bikiniarstwo* in the beginning with persuasion at factory and school parties, in the dance halls that the culture department of the Metropolitan National Council set up back then in Warsaw. Through the loudspeakers music, slogans, poems, songs on current political subjects was broadcast. That was meant to form consciousness. They were frequented by *Bikiniarze* youth and when a properly fast piece was played, they started to



boogie (*drygac*), as it was called back then. ZMP activists would then stop those couples and start to persuade them otherwise. In the summer of 1952 the secretary of the District Committee, comrade Plaska, summoned the district leadership and said the following: “If a son behaves badly, is insubordinate, and his father just keeps explaining to him, then at a certain point, when words are not enough, he has to lay down the law. He does that out of fatherly love, out of care. Regarding the fact that those *Bikiniarze* and *Chuligani* – comrade Plaska used those terms interchangeably – still do not amend their ways despite our persuasion, despite the press, the radio and despite all the caricatures hung on the wall gazettes, it’s time to lay down the law for them [...]” [...] I don’t remember how I reacted then to comrade Plaska’s instructions. I certainly didn’t object loudly. It’s worth pointing out that back then the secretary of the District Committee was a big figure. [...] One day I was returning home rather early in the evening. In the dance hall on Paris Commune square the loudspeakers were blasting music and slogans. That was our propaganda centre working. I went there and encountered the beginning of such a fatherly punishment. They played some fast piece and young people started to boogie (*drygac*). At that point a gang jumped forward and grabbed one of those youngsters and dragged him to the nearby office of the Warsaw Consumer Cooperative to the first floor where there was a pharmacy. I noticed Plaska [...] and somebody from the presidium of the District Administration of the ZMP, probably its chairman. When I came in behind them into the office, they were beating the boy with their fists and shoes, they were all kicking together (Kuron, 1990: 45-6).

Policies like arresting and beating young people because they liked to dance differently came to an end with the onset of destalinization which reached its zenith in 1956. The events of that year resulted in the implosion of the ZMP. Following a revolutionary period of youth activism from below, the Party would reassert its control and recreate a political youth organization to succeed the ZMP, the *Zwiazek Mlodziezy Socjalistycznej* (ZMS – Union of Socialist Youth), but it never again had the mass character nor the ideological penetration of the ZMP (Sadowska, 2010: 123-39). From that moment onwards, the Party ceased to exert control in the private sphere of life, thereby breaking with some of the totalitarian aspects of the Stalinist period. It was ultimately the combination of political and generational

change though that made the *Bikiniarze* subculture go out of fashion and disappear.

The importance of rock music

Following destalinization, some new outside influence started to trickle through and manifest itself in various ways among the younger generation. Despite antagonizing “bourgeois decadent culture”, Wladyslaw Gomulka had opened Poland up to the West after 1956 albeit to a limited extent. This was in fact part of a broader trend that appeared in other Soviet bloc countries, most notably in the Soviet Union where opening up to western culture in a controlled way served to further the Communists’ goal of achieving cultural superiority vis-à-vis the capitalist world (Yurchak, 2006: 158-211). In Poland, western radio stations ceased to be jammed, a certain amount of publications from the West were made available and western theatre and films were allowed to be shown to the public (Bethell, 1969: 237-38).

During the 1960s, an influential conveyor of western youth culture would be constituted by rock music, which had come to replace boogie and jazz as the favoured music style. The Polish regime did not prohibit Western music, but rather passively tolerated it since it was thought that it would serve as a distraction and keep the younger generation from engaging in political activity. Nevertheless, Polish youths had limited access to music from the West and would mainly listen to it via the emissions of Radio Luxemburg and Radio Free Europe. In spite of such limitations, the Beatlemania of the West provided inspiration for an indigenous bitel style to appear among the country’s youth. The Beatles’ movie, *A Hard Day’s Night*, was also screened in Polish theaters and the Polish Czerwone Gitary (“The red guitars”), influenced and inspired by the success of the Fab Four, would become one of the most successful bands in the history of Polish rock music (Ryback, 1990: 56-60).

Whereas the opening up to the West was part of a broader phenomenon across the Soviet bloc in the 1960s, Poland certainly presented a more liberal stance in this area than the other socialist countries. Western bands were even allowed to tour the country, which in every case came to constitute a spectacular event. In November 1965, the British band The Animals visited Poland for a two-week concert tour. This event in effect popularised beat music in Poland. Two years later, in April 1967, The Rolling Stones played a legendary concert in Warsaw, which even led to rioting outside the concert venue since demand exceeded the number of tickets

available. Not only was the sheer fact that these provocative icons of Western youth culture visited and played in a 'disciplined' socialist state near revolutionary, these bands' concerts would be of great influence on Polish bands (Zielinski, 2005: 54-58). It was around this time that an original Polish brand of rock and roll called 'big beat' emerged which paves the way for rock music to become an important element of youth culture in the country and some of the musicians of the era such as Czeslaw Niemen, the lead singer of the band Niebiesko-Czarni (The Blues and Blacks), would even attain a significant amount of fame in Poland and beyond (Ryback, 1990: 23-24).

Although its actual influence on the younger generation is hard to measure, one cannot deny that such elements of contact with the world from other side of the Iron Curtain were of importance in forming that generation's consciousness since they facilitated a feeling of transnational generational solidarity. The chance to see some rock icons and especially their extravagant behaviour was a confrontational experience. More so, Eric Burdon singing "We gotta get out of this place," or Mick Jagger flamboyantly articulating, "I can't get no satisfaction," demonstrated the rebellious potential that Western rock music offered. However, the Communist regime had no wish to infuse youth with rebellion. The official fledgling Polish rock scene depicted the non-political and positive side of life and while the regime had not objected to The Rolling Stones' concert in Warsaw -for the lucrative reason of financial profit- it had not agreed to a longer tour. In fact, anxiety about mass hysteria had led the regime to oppose a visit to Poland by Beatles (Oseka, 2007). It was thus somewhat shocking when, in 1967, Czeslaw Niemen - formerly of Niebiesko-Czarni and well on his way to becoming a Polish rock icon in his own right - caused some controversy with his protest song *Dziwny jest ten swiat* ("Strange is this world") in which he lamented the darker side of people's relations with each other, implying à la Bob Dylan that all was not well in socialist society (Zielinski, 2005: 86-87). This underlying message became utterly clear when the country's students took to the streets in protest the following year leading to a regime crackdown that would also be aimed at curbing Western influence among the country's youth (Fidelis, 2011, pp. 146-47).

Polish hippies

The transnational influence and counter-cultural appeal of rock music also played a role in the emergence of the first groups of hippies in Poland around 1967. The hippy movement was de facto the first youth subculture to

manifest itself since the *Bikiniarze* in the 1950s. Like the *Bikiniarze* it was part of a broader trend that was manifesting itself in the Soviet bloc (Risch, 2005: 566). The hippies predominantly differentiated themselves by their looks – long hair, necklaces, bell-bottom trousers and clothes often fashioned by private tailors since such items could not be purchased in the official state retail stores. The colourful hippie look not only stood out, but moreover contrasted with the grey and dull fashion lines offered by the latter – a characteristic which the hippies had in common with the *Bikiniarze*. Although the Polish hippie movement was in no way an original phenomenon –it was directly inspired by the analogous movement in the West and showed some remarkable resemblances– its adherents did manifest some significant differences with their Western peers. First of all, the Polish hippie movement never broke through on a similar large scale as in the West, but was adhered to by a subgroup of young people who were attracted to it since they already thought of themselves as outsiders living on the periphery of socialist society. Secondly, their non-conformism was neither a rebellion against the evils of consumer society, for the simple reason that Poland in the 1960s was far from an affluent society in which consumer goods were widely available. Finally, their ‘rebellion’ was not directed at the ideals of the socialist system as such, for much of what the hippies stood for was in fact similar to the goals of the Communist utopia. The Polish hippies were apolitical and bent on detaching themselves from the reality around them and it is in this sense that their rebellion must be understood. They rebelled against the reality of socialist society as it existed in which authoritarian power had been substituted for the Communist ideals and where youth was not allowed to enjoy the freedoms of life as they saw fit (Sipowicz, 2008, 90-101).

Initially, the regime – and by proxy the ZMS – took a keen interest in the hippie movement for its supposedly leftist anti-Western credentials. [4] However, the movement rapidly came to be seen as a threat since its rebellious nature was perceived to have a potentially wider appeal among the country’s youth. In the eyes of the regime the ‘hippie programme’ denounced the state, its borders and laws as well as private property. The pacifism of the hippie movement entailed not only nonviolence, but the outright refusal of military service. The hippie movement preached complete freedom – morally, culturally and sexually. [5] These elements stood in stark contrast with the official youth policy. Moreover, a nationwide network was suspected to exist since personal links connected groups of hippies in different cities and it was known that occasional nationwide gatherings took place. Hippies were perceived as young individuals – often with



psychological problems and with intelligentsia family backgrounds – who did not work or study and were therefore regarded as hostile elements. This negative image of the hippie movement was exacerbated by its supposed promotion of drug abuse – as marijuana or LSD were not available Polish hippies improvised and experimented with pharmaceutical drugs that were acquired illegally. [6] The rationale for the supposed threat of the hippies was based upon their non-conformist or rather anti-social behaviour, as was reported on in an overtly meticulous manner by the security apparatus:

Part of the “hippie” rites include collective meditation accompanied by big beat, or at times classical, music. As they themselves state, the ideal accompaniment to consider would be a single continuous sound which would last for at least 20 minutes. During their contemplations they use narcotic substances (tri) [7] and alcohol. At these meetings it is often the case that both boys, as well as girls, are in the nude. [8]

The authorities strived to counter-act the hippie movement through repression and persecution by the security apparatus thus treating them as de facto enemies of the state. While some Polish hippies were individually subjected to certain forms of repression, the regime preferred other means than the brutal violence embraced during the Stalinist era. The Polish hippie movement became the subject of a negative propaganda campaign in which the student journal *ITD* took a leading role and served as an example for other publications. The articles that appeared concerning the hippie movement – often inspired by material supplied by the security apparatus – portrayed it as a group of junkies, prostitutes or diseased individuals (Sipowicz, 2008: 111- 20). However, it is interesting to note that prior to this antagonistic campaign *ITD* had served as a tribune of sorts by publishing readers’ letters concerning the hippie movement. These letters revealed a different picture of how the hippie movement was perceived among students. The younger generation could identify with the feeling of “possible apocalypse” due to the nuclear arms race and a certain pessimistic outlook on the world. More so, the readers’ letters confirmed the wish of being able to enjoy life to the fullest, which was not possible in the grey and dull world of their elders (*ITD*, 1969a: 6; *ITD*, 1969b: 6). The inclination to rebel was in fact perceived as a desire to find happiness – a happiness that could not be provided by the socialist state and for that reason the hippies represented a challenge to the regime.

Modernization and youth culture

The hippie movement as such may have represented an apolitical contestation of the regime, its roots for rebellion – a society in which young people were becoming more and more alienated – was a more widely shared experience. Moreover, towards the end of the 1960s the regime would be rocked by a wave of contestation, which was de facto generational in nature and, ironically, the generation that rebelled was the first one to have come of age in the Communist era. The first moment of this generational rebellion occurred in March 1968, when Poland saw the emergence of a nationwide student protest movement. Although, the protest movement shook the regime, it failed to destabilize it and a crackdown followed. However, the regime simultaneously faced another predicament since the country's economy was showing signs of a downturn while it was coming to feel the strain of the post-war demographic boom. When the deteriorating situation forced the government to raise subsidized prices on basic foodstuffs worker protest broke out in December 1970. The regime sent in the army in to quell the strikes leading to the deaths of several tens of workers. This violent escalation led to the downfall of Gomulka and his replacement by Edward Gierek as Party leader. The latter promised to tackle the country's economic problems and introduce a new era of prosperity (Junes, 2015: 144-46). [9] Indeed, the 1970s and particularly the initial years of the decade had a semblance of rising prosperity. The population – and especially the younger generation – was tired of the austerity of the Gomulka era and longed for an increase in both the availability and quality of consumer commodities. To a significant degree this was due to influence from the West, compared to which the Soviet bloc states increasingly lagged behind in fulfilling their citizens' material needs and desires. Such comparison was possible because of certain “windows to the West” like television programmes and movies in which the material affluence and higher living standard on the other side of the Iron Curtain were clearly demonstrated (Kotkin, 2001: 41-42). This, above all, gave rise to a particular fantasy and myth about the West, with which the Communist regimes would have to struggle with. Therefore, the new leadership under Gierek made a strong point of raising living standards and closing the gap with the West with which it aimed to buy the allegiance of the nation (Rolicki, 2002: 191-92). The aim was to build a “Second Poland”, one that would be better and based upon the “achievements of the scientific-technological” revolution and, above all, would be the work of the younger generation. This “Second Poland” would of course be a socialist society under the leadership of the *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*



(PZPR – Polish United Worker’s Party) and with strong ties to the Soviet Union. Promising a higher living standard, the new leadership wished to promote a higher “socialist morality” that would counter the “bourgeois notion of gathering riches”. [10] However, despite the socialist rhetoric it was clear that the West and its affluence served as the reference for this ‘Second Poland’. Moreover, the comparison with the capitalist world would be facilitated by the fact that from the 1970s it also became easier for Poles to travel to the West and see the difference with their own eyes (Kanet, 1981: 383).

Thus the pull-factor of the West’s affluence was evident in serving as an example for the material desires of Polish consumers, especially among the younger generation who had not experienced the hardships of the War or the harshness of Stalinism. This desire for consumer products from the West would also bring with itself certain non-material side effects that could be interpreted as having an underlying political meaning. In particular the emergence of a distinct youth fashion culture would have a rebellious effect. In the post-war years young people were still expected to emulate grown-up dress, which was quite conservative, while even – especially during the Stalinist period – being compelled to wear uniform-like attire in a variety of circumstances. After 1956, fashion trends emanating from the West encouraged a break with this etiquette and more colourful clothes and sportswear became part of the dress code for young people. The hippie movement gave further impetus towards a specific youth fashion style that stood in contrast to the bleak and conservative model propagated by the regime and society at large. The 1960s produced a certain veneration of youthfulness and good looks, spawning the introduction of the mini-skirt and more sexually explicit ways of dressing (Wierzbicki, 2009: 166).

By the end of the decade, western fashion trends and products had become a standard credo of the younger generation de facto becoming status statements. Such was the case with fashion products like blue jeans. Jeans in the West had been an element of youth counter-cultural fashion in the 1950s and 1960s, but by the 1970s they had become a mainstream and commercial fashion product. Not so in Poland, where on the one hand jeans became a widely worn material among the younger generation, but on the other hand stood apart as they remained an item hard to obtain and therefore not void of a ‘status statement’. Above all, the Polish-produced substitute Teksas jeans were no match for real American denim. Although the price of a pair of Levi’s, Wrangler or Rifle jeans –which could only be bought abroad or in the Pewex hard-currency shops– was more than ten times that of a Teksas –themselves not cheap by then Polish standards– they

were preferred for their superior quality and comfort (Pelka, 2007: 185-90). Thus, even in such a trivial thing as the wearing of a pair of denim pants did young people in Poland show their preference for 'Western culture' to the envisioned socialist society. This of course stood in cynical contrast with the projections of the official 'propaganda of success' of the Gierek era. Although the upper inner-party circles were aware of such manifestation of 'petit-bourgeois consciousness' among the younger generation and the population at large, little could be done to counteract it except to keep spinning more ideological projections in the media (Taras, 1984: 145). By the end of the decade the image of Polish society portrayed in the official media was becoming ever more detached from the day-to-day reality.

The counter-cultural rebellion of the 1980s

This slumbering malaise exploded into a full-blown crisis in 1980. As a result of new price hikes, a wave of worker strikes erupted during the summer engulfing the whole country and subsequently led to the foundation of Solidarnosc. In the months that followed Polish society was galvanised to a hitherto unseen extent with Solidarnosc becoming a mass social movement encompassing a third of the country's population. It was also a time of freedom and hope, during which the Party's control was dealt a decisive blow, but this process was abruptly halted with the imposition of martial law in December 1981. In the wake of martial law, while the military took control of the country, the regime introduced a period of normalization in an attempt to regain the initiative. The normalization period was one of gloom and desperation for the younger generation, which was bereft of any real positive perspectives for its future. Although youth political activity –both oppositional as well as official– was at a low, this was not entirely explained by a depoliticisation caused by the effect of the normalisation and the economic crisis. In a sense, the 'anti-politics' of the Solidarnosc era was also responsible for depoliticising the younger generation (See Ost, 1990, p. 2; Garton Ash, 1985; De Weydenthal et al., 1983).

However, this did not mean that there was no spirit of rebellion amidst Poland's youth of the 1980s. That decade in fact saw youth rebellion in Poland on a larger and more enduring scale than at any previous time in the post-war era. The beginning of the decade, especially with the rise of Solidarnosc, saw widespread youth politicisation, as the 1980-1981 crisis had an inherent generational aspect. Solidarnosc was a young people's movement (Wertenstein-Zulawski, 1993: 36). Not only was the largest single age group under 29 years of age, but it also constituted 44.5 per cent of the

movement as a whole. The emergence of Solidarity furthermore depleted the official youth organizations of more than a significant percentage of their nominal membership, with an exodus of the rank-and-file leaving primarily those activists who were card-carrying party members (Adamski, 1996: 160-61; Oschlies, 1982: 104-06; Wankel, 1992: 153). The mass mobilisation of 1980- 1981 abruptly ended with the imposition of martial law. In the post-martial law years, during so-called normalisation, new social movements arose that were carried mostly by the younger generation. Movements like the *Ruch Społeczeństwa Alternatywnego* [RSA, "Movement for an alternative society"], the *Ruch Wolność i Pokój* [WiP, "Freedom and peace movement"], the *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa* ["Orange alternative"], the *Federacja Młodzieży Walczącej* [FMW, "Federation of fighting youth"], or the re-activated *Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów* ["Independent students' association"] posed a new political challenge to the regime. These movements focused on more concrete issues such as the military draft and introduced new forms of political action like happenings that differed from those of the elder opposition (Kenney, 2003: 57-164; Fydrych and Misztal, 2008; Junes, 2015; Kozłowski, 2010; Smółka-Gnauck, 2012; Wierzbicki, 2010).

This youth rebellion was nevertheless not strictly politically defined. It was broader, and it was reflected by the youth counter-cultures of the time, which in turn were directly influenced by the music of the era. The decade witnessed a multitude of youth subcultures appear that manifested defiant attitudes towards society. The most obvious new youth subculture to emerge in the 1980s was punk, and it was closely linked to the rise of punk rock in Poland. [11] Punk had originated in the West in the late 1970s. The slogan "no future" – most memorably pronounced by the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten in their cult track God Save the Queen – was highly recognizable for Polish youths, who confronted economic hardships in the 1980s that were far greater than those in the West underlining the dwindling prospects for their future lives (Ramet, 1991: 219). Moreover, by the 1980s English-language lyrics were widely understood as a result of the greater openness Poles had enjoyed vis-à-vis the West. Youth magazines, even those published by the official youth organizations, published the lyrics of Western bands' songs while the use of "anglicisms" (*anglicyzmy*) became more prolific in youthful slang in general. Above all, the latter was filled with allusions to lyrics from Polish rock songs in the 1980s (Kosinski, 2006: 340-42). Polish punks, with their provocative look consisting of torn or cut-up jeans, leather or military-style jackets with a complementary provocative haircut, preferably a mohawk – referred to as an *irokez*, the term derived



from Native American nation, the Iroquois – emphasised their rebellion against society in a direct visual way. Bands such as Brygada Kryzys, Dezerter, KSU, and Siekiera could usually count on a significant punk following among their audiences engaging in the obligatory “pogo” – a dance style in which one jumps up and down in the same place while holding the body stiff. More importantly, the young punks could indeed see themselves as a *Poroniona generacja* [stillborn generation] as voiced by the classic song by Dezerter.

Another subculture to emerge from the late 1970s onwards were the Rastafarians, who dressed in colourful wear – usually with the typical green-yellow-red combinations of the Ethiopian flag – and the characteristic dreadlock hairstyle in imitation of the movement’s global icon, Bob Marley. Moreover, the Rastafarian religion provided much of the symbolism for the slang of the subculture, as noted above with the use of the term “Babylon” for the detested social reality. The Rastafarian subculture promoted ideas of freedom, equality, and drug use in a way that was similar to the hippie movement a decade earlier. The latter conversely saw a revival in the 1980s, and the Polish neo-hippies would often be seen mingling with their Rasta peers. Musically, the Rastafarians preferred reggae, the main proponents of which were bands like Izrael, Daab, or Kultura.

In contrast to the laid-back groove of the reggae beat stood the raw and rhythmic rock sound of heavy metal and its various offspring such as black metal or thrash metal, which simultaneously emerged with the above styles on the Polish rock scene. Here, Western contacts in this genre were even more direct, as the then-famous British heavy metal band Iron Maiden kicked off its “World Slavery Tour” in 1984 in Warsaw, with further concerts in Łódź and Poznań, a feat reminiscent of The Rolling Stones’ visit in 1967 (Ryback, 1990: 180). The adherents and fans of heavy metal rock were known in Poland as *Metalowcy*. They were recognisable by their long hair and standard wardrobe of tight jeans or leather attire adorned with badges or inscriptions of their favorite bands. Whereas the music’s raw volume was like that of punk rock, heavy metal was more rhythmic and technical compared to the raw straightforward sound of the former. This trait of heavy metal incited ritualistic behavior among its fans, at times even inspiring occult practices. Some sub-streams of *Metalowcy* identified themselves as Satanists, which provoked negative reactions not only from the authorities, but from Poland’s Catholic clergy as well. Major bands in the Polish heavy metal circuit were TSA, Turbo, and Kat.

Some subcultures that appeared during the decade stood in opposition to others. Thus, the so-called *Poppersi* (Poppers), who adhered to disco rather

than rock and were characterized by a glamorous and commercial style of bright clothing, merged into a well-groomed and elegant look with recognizable highlighted forelocks. This style was dubbed in the youth slang of time as *szpan* (swank), denoting the need to impress and show off. Poppersi also adhered to mainstream rock groups that held sway in the early 1980s such as Lady Pank or Republika. This subculture was despised, among others, by punks, which led to neighbourhood rivalries and even violence between adherents of the two subcultures. Similar tensions surrounded the subculture of skinheads, which also appeared among the younger generation of Poles in the 1980s. This subculture – characterized by bomber-type jackets, tight jeans, army boots, and the distinctive shaved head – was closely related to the grassroots phenomenon of hooliganism – not to be confused with the Stalinist era *Chuligani* – that existed in less well-off urban areas. Polish skinheads most often contrasted themselves with the punk milieu, despite some striking outward similarities such as the type of music they listened to (Ryback, 1990: 185).

The politics of counter-culture

This variety of subcultures emerging during the decade suggested the existence of a certain political pluralism among this generation of youth. For example, the punk milieu was close to the milieu of anarchists active within the RSA, while the skinhead movement created a nationalist, working-class oriented ideology. Such ideological differences at times even escalated into violent confrontations between adherents of different subcultures, with rumors of the state security apparatus being involved in exploiting such rivalries. Some subcultures seemingly possessed political features– some of which were even deemed a threat to the regime. Despite these political assumptions, no smear campaigns like those against the *Bikiniarze* or the hippie movement emerged. Still, certain fanzines like the popular punkzine *Azotox*, *Gangrena* (“Gangrene”), *Manipulator* (“Manipulator”), *Obled* (“Delirium”), *Obok* (“Close by”), *QQRyQ*, *Rewolter* (“Rebel”) and *Zabili Mnie* (“They killed me”), not only dealt with music in Poland and abroad, but ran also more politicized articles concerned with problems affecting the younger generation like alcohol abuse. They criticized the regime’s plans to build a nuclear reactor, resembling anti-nuclear campaigns of movements like WiP in the wake of the Chernobyl catastrophe in Soviet Ukraine. [12] Certain issues thus created common ground between, music, subcultures, and social movements in the 1980s.

Despite some politicized trends within the counter-cultural sphere and their



connections with grassroots politics of the era, the Polish rock scene of the 1980s as such was formally apolitical. However, as the decade's youthful defiant spirit went beyond the strictly political sphere, the music fed and in turn fed off these rebellious emotions (Wertenstein-Zulawski, 1993: 36-38). Poland's youth not only rebelled against the regime, but also against the Catholic Church and the opposition. The new social movements introduced new forms of action or mobilized around concrete issues, but the majority of youth was imbued with a sentiment of rejecting the existing reality altogether. It was this latter trait that fed the evolution of the music and the counter-cultures of the era. In fact, the rock scene of the 1980s constituted a so-called "third circuit" (*trzeci obieg*) – a circuit of alternative youth culture. The idea of this third circuit stood in opposition and contrast to the first circuit which was the official popular culture promoted by the state as well as the second circuit which was the illegal oppositional cultural domain represented mostly by the underground press. As a metaphor, the third circuit denoted an independent youth sphere, void of interference from the world of the elders in which youth was able to express itself freely. Polish rock and in particular its alternative segment became the primary mode through which this sphere took form. The rebellious appeal of the music and the various counter-cultural lifestyles were propagated by radio emissions, circulated cassette recordings, a variety of fanzines, and, most importantly, live concerts where the younger generation could come together and give expression to their feeling of community (Idzikowska-Czubaj, 2011: 285). The foremost example of the latter was the rock festival in the central Polish town of Jarocin. Organized annually throughout the decade, it became a legend on its own. Thousands of youths would flock to the provincial town, live in tents for a few days and enjoy the music of bands that barely got any radio time or other possibilities to present themselves. Although the festival managed to maintain its apolitical nature it nevertheless represented an oasis of freedom for those who attended it. Above all, it was the only event of its nature in the whole Soviet bloc. By the late 1980s though, the festival began to lose some of its aura of uniting Poland's youth in defiance as the event came to be more and more ritualized. However, it was in Jarocin, during those annually recurring summer days of the martial law and normalization years, that the noncompliance of Poland's youth during the 1980s became visible – both for the regime as well as for many a member of the younger generation itself (Lesiakowski et al., 2004: 14-63). It is difficult to gauge to what extent the regime treated rock concerts and the festival in Jarocin as a safety valve of sorts (Junes, 2014b, 246-50). It is clear though that the regime had changed its course on youth subcultures significantly by

the 1980s. No longer were they presented in smear campaigns as enemies of the state, though the security apparatus was still monitoring them. However, the latter's interest was focused more on their mutual relations and interactions, as is demonstrated by a report on the 1987 Jarocin festival:

The Rock Festival in Jarocin constitutes a permanent element of youth culture with a nationwide outreach. The experience from the previous years as well as from this year's event shows that it is reasonable to have it continue, though with recurring attention for the changes that take place among the subcultural groups at every next edition. The conclusions from their observation in 1986 allowed to correctly prepare security measures, anticipate changes and improve the effectiveness of the operational work in this area. The importance of this problem is illustrated albeit by the amount of groups - where with a near constant number of participants the balance of power between the subcultural factions increased from 25 per cent to 50 per cent. [13]

One of the reasons hereof were the emerging rivalries and sometimes violent confrontations between different subcultures, most often between punks and skinheads. Since the security apparatus was interested in such aspects, it is quite probable that the regime preferred the country's youth to be contained within the sphere of counter-culture - distracted by its own little conflicts - rather than have it venture into overt political opposition. The young generation's political contestation nevertheless constituted an increasing problem with which it would have to deal at the end of the decade (Junes, 2014a: 341-45).

Conclusion

The cases of youth subcultures discussed in this article emerged and subsequently disappeared during specific historical circumstances. What they had in common was that they gave expression to a feeling of discontent and rebellion among certain groups of youth and were inspired by trends emanating from the West. The rebellious nature of the adherents of these subcultures was not political nor were these subcultures themselves large or widespread phenomena, but they were nonetheless perceived by the regime as a political threat that had to be countered, neutralized or contained. Initially, these subcultures were used instrumentally by the



regime as ideological scapegoats and were targeted for their symbolic role of Western subversive influence. During the 1980s, however, the regime though on the one hand still wary of them, tolerated them as it saw what most likely constituted a safety valve of sorts, distracting the younger generation from any oppositional political activity. Moreover, from the 1960s onwards, the regime had already started to tolerate certain spin-offs or related phenomena from counter-cultural trends in the sphere of music and fashion in order to channel potential youth resentment. These aspects of youth counter-culture nonetheless had a far-reaching influence and appeal among respective younger generations undermining the regime's efforts to win their allegiance. Despite the youth subcultures being apolitical, the regime initially saw them as a political threat. This stance changed once it became clear that counter-cultural trends constituted a lesser evil compared to outright political contestation and it was thus more instrumental not to impart political content upon them. Though at the crux of the phenomenon of youth counter-culture in Communist Poland lay the fact that Poland's youths preferred to think for themselves instead of listening to out-of-touch party dictates and in their minds western pop culture came to be perceived as superior to the boring, ritualized and unnatural youth culture promoted by the socialist state.

References

- Adamski, W. (1996) "Przynaloznosc Zwiaskowa i Miejsce w Strukturze a Interesy Grupowe". In: Adamski, W. (ed.), *Polacy '81: Postrzeganie Kryzysu i Konflikta*. Wydawnictwo IFIS PAN, 160-61.
- Bethell, N. (1969) *Gomulka: His Poland, His Communism*. Holt Rinehart and Winston.
- Chlopek, M. (2005) *Bikiniarze: Pierwsza Polska Subkultura*. Wydawnictwo Akademickie "Zak".
- De Weydenthal, J. B., Porter, B. B. and Devlin, K. (1983) *The Polish Drama: 1980- 1982*. Lexington Books.
- Edele, M. (2002) "Strange Young Men in Stalin's Moscow: The Birth and Life of the Stiliagi, 1945-1953". *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50: 37-61.
- Eisler, J. (2006) *Polski Rok 1968*. Instytut Pamieci Narodowej.



Eisler, J. (2000) *Grudzien 1970: Geneza, Przebieg, Konsekwencje*. Sensacje XX Wieku.

Fidelis, M. (2011) "Red state, golden youth: Student culture and political protest in 1960s Poland". In: Brown, T. and Lorena, A. (eds.), *Between the Avant-Garde and the Everyday: Subversive Politics in Europe from 1957 to the Present*. Berghahn, 145-153.

Fydrych, W. and Misztal, B. (2008) *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa. Rewolucja Krasnoludków*. Wydawnictwo Pomarańczowa Alternatywa.

Garton Ash, T. (1985) *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*. Vintage Books.

Idzikowska-Czubaj, A. (2011) *Rock w PRL-u: O paradoksach współistnienia*. Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.

ITD (1969a) "Hippies: Listy do Normy". *ITD* 10 (433): 6.

ITD (1969b) "W sprawie hippies". *ITD* 16 (439): 6.

Jarosz, D. (2000) *Polacy a Stalinizm 1948-1956*. Instytut Historii PAN.

Judt, T. (2005) *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. Penguin.

Junes, T. (2014a) "Poland's 'Generation of 89': Rebellion, ridicule and the end of history", *Sociological Problems* 1-2/2014, 326-48 (Bulgarian, see: www.sp-bg.eu/index.php/bg/).

Junes, T. (2014b) "Facing the music: How the foundations of socialism were rocked in communist Poland." In: Risch, W. J. (ed.), *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe*. Lexington Books: 357-401.

Junes, T. (2015) *Student Politics in Communist Poland: Generations of Consent and Dissent*. Lexington Books.

Kanet, R. E. (1981) "Poland, the socialist community, and East-West relations". In: Simon, M. D. and Kanet, R. E. (eds.), *Background to Crisis: Policy and Politics in Gierek's Poland*. Westview Press, 371-401.



Kenney, P. (2003) *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989*. Princeton University Press.

Kosinski, K. (2006) *Oficjalne i Prywatne Zycie Mlodziezy w Czasach PRL*. Rosner i Wspólnicy.

Kotkin, S. (2001) *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford University Press.

Kozłowski, T. (2010) "Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów 1980-1989". In: Kaminski, L. and Waligóra, G. (eds.), *NSZZ Solidarnosc 1980-1989. Tom 7. Wokół "Solidarnosci"*. Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 237-98.

Kuron, J. (1990) *Wiara i wina. Do i od komunizmu*. Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza.

Lesiakowski, K., Perzyna, P. and Toborek, T. (2004) *Jarocin w Obiektywie Bezpieki*. Instytut Pamięci Narodowej.

Oschlies, W. (1982) *Polens Jugend: Kinder der Solidarnosc? Jugend in Osteuropa*, vol 2. Böhlau Verlag.

Oseka, P. (2007) "Satisfaction' w PRL. 40 Rocznic koncertu The Rolling Stones." *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 14 April, 24.

Ost, D. (1990) *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland Since 1968*. Temple University Press.

Partia Młodzież (1973) *Partia. Młodzież. Wybór dokumentów 1971-1973*. Książka i Wiedza.

Pelka, A. (2007) *Teksas-land: Moda młodzieżowa w PRL*. Wydawnictwo Trio.

QQryQ (1987a) "Zarnowiec Stop." *QQryQ* 10: 2.

QQryQ (1987b) "Pietia, Alkoholizm, Seksizm, Debilizm." *QQryQ* 10: 17.

Ramet, S. P. (1991) *Social Currents in Eastern Europe: The Sources and Meaning of the Great Transformation*. Duke University Press.



Risch, W. J. (2005) "Soviet 'Flower Children': Hippies and the youth counter-culture in 1970s L'viv". *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 3: 565-84.

Rolicki, J. (2002) *Edward Gierek: Zycie i Narodziny Legendy*. Iskry.

Ryback, T. (1990) *Rock around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*. Oxford University Press.

Sadowska, J. (2010) *Sercem i Mysla Związani z Partia: Związek Młodzieży Socjalistycznej (1957-1976)*. Wydawnictwo Trio.

Sipowicz, K. (2008) *Hipisi w PRL-u*. BAOBAB.

Smólka-Gnauck, A. (2012) *Miedzy Wolnoscia a Pokojem: Zarys Historii Ruchu Wolnosc i Pokój*. Instytut Pamieci Narodowej.

Taras, R. (1984) *Ideology in a Socialist State*. Cambridge University Press.

Wankel, C. (1992) *Anti-Communist Student Organizations and the Polish Renewal*. Macmillan.

Wertenstein-Zulawski, J. (1993) *Miedzy nadzieja a rozpacza*. Instytut Kultury.

Wierzbicki, M. (2006) *Związek Młodzieży Polskiej i Jego Członkowie*. Wydawnictwo Trio.

Wierzbicki, M. (2009) *Młodzież w PRL*. Instytut Pamieci Narodowej.

Wierzbicki, M. (2010) "Niezaradne Ugrupowania Młodzieżowe w Polsce Lat Osiemdziesiątych". In: Kaminski, L. and Waligóra, G. (eds.), *NSZZ Solidarnosc 1980-1989. Tom 7. Wokół "Solidarnosci"*. Instytut Pamieci Narodowej, 359-85.

Yurchak, A. (2006) *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press.

Zielinski, P. (2005) *Scena Rockowa w PRL: Historia, Organizacja, Znaczenie*. Wydawnictwo Trio.

Footnotes

1. See also Gleb Tsipursky, "Hunters of overseas rags and foreign currency": Stiliagi in the Cold War Soviet Union, 1945-1964", [Critique & Humanism 43 \(2015\)](#)
2. Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), KC PZPR, 237/XVI-15, *Analiza sytuacji na odcinku mlodziezy akademickiej*, 13-16.
3. Archiwum Uniwersytetu Jagiellonskiego (AUJ), O/194-XII, *Meldunek sytuacyjny na U.J. z dnia 24.X.1952r., oraz 25.X.*, 1; O/194-XIII, *Meldunek sytuacyjny 26.X.1952r.*, 1.
4. Interview with Ryszard Terlecki. Kraków: conducted and recorded by the author, 2007.
5. APG, 2384/2999, *Informacja o dzialalnosci "ruchu hippies" na terenie Wybrzeza*, 32-35.
6. AIPN, 0365/105.t1, *Notatka dot. grup mlodziezowych tzw. hippies*, 131-38.
7. "Tri" was based on a solvent often used to clean fabrics. Its fumes would be inhaled in order to achieve hallucinations.
8. AIPN, 0365/105.t1, *Notatka dot. grup mlodziezowych tzw. hippies*, 136-37.
9. For a full account of the events of 1968-1970 see Eisler (2000; 2006).
10. "O aktywny udzial mlodego pokolenia w budowie socjalistycznej Polski -- zadania partii, panstwa i narodu w wychowaniu mlodziezy. Tezy programowe KC PZPR przyete przez VII Plenum 28 listopada 1972r." (Partia. Mlodzi, 1973: 67-80).
11. The following paragraphs on subcultures are mainly based on Idzikowska-Czubaj, (2011: 270-75) and Kosinski (2006: 387-88).
12. Open Society Archives (OSA), Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute, HU OSA 300-55-9-3-2, *Polish Independent Press Review*, no. 7 (1987): 14-15; QQryQ (1987a: 2; 1987b: 17).



13. "Nr 15 -- 1987, Kalisz -- Sprawozdanie z XVIII Festiwalu Rockowego Jarocin '87" (Lesiakowski et al., 2004: 179).