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Esotericism in Socialist Poland as a Confluence of Traditions from the East, the West, and the Global South*

Introduction

The emergence of studies on esotericism¹ in twentieth-century Poland in recent years has brought to light primarily traditions that existed prior to 1939 (e.g. Rzeczycka & Trzcińska, 2019) and the boom of esoteric practices after the end of communist rule (e.g. Hall, 2007; Pasek, 2013). However, the developments between 1945 and 1990, which are the missing link between these two periods, have attracted considerably less interest (Bednarczuk, 2024a, 2024b; Hall, 2014; Łagosz, 2013, 2016). World War II and the initial years of the communist regime constituted a dramatic rupture in cultural life, including within the esoteric milieu. Some of its key members died, while others, like Wanda Dynowska, lived abroad and had only limited influence in the country. Those who remained in Poland were preoccupied with the struggle for survival. Some, like the once well-known psychic Eugenia Palej, were prevented from advertising their services in the press as late as 1960, which resulted in their erasure from collective consciousness (AAN, 1102/2098, p. 112). Others were harassed by the secret police and imprisoned; the most prominent case is that of Robert Walter, an anthroposophist, Freemason, and astrologer

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¹ I consider esotericism broadly, including parapsychology and New Age (see Hane-graaff, 2012; Zinser, 2009).

(Łagosz, 2013). Meanwhile, those seeking to engage with esotericism were compelled to adapt to the ideological framework of state socialism.

The 1960s and Impulses from the USSR

The materialist worldview imposed by communism was dismissive – and between 1949 and 1955 brutally hostile – towards religion and spirituality. Consequently, censorship prevented the appearance of publications on astrology, theosophy, anthroposophy, palmistry, Rosicrucian Christianity, or spiritism until the 1960s. This resulted in a disconnection from older traditions and forced the esoteric milieu to negotiate its position from scratch and look for “allowed” topics, communication channels, and for allies. References to advances in natural sciences and to Soviet parapsychology proved effective, enabling more and more press articles to be published. After all, this was the era of the conquest of the cosmos, the decoding of the DNA, experiments with mental states, the burgeoning of cybernetics, discoveries in the field of neuronal excitability, etc.; thus, psychic abilities were basically associated with phenomena related to physics, neuroscience, and cybernetics (Manczarski, 1961).

Since parapsychology was increasingly tolerated by the Soviet authorities, the general public’s interest in this topic, both in the USSR and abroad, was growing. Polish journalists covering esoteric topics often mentioned Leonid Vasiliev’s investigations in psychic abilities, and Rosa Kuleshova, who was said to be able to distinguish printed words with her fingertips (Boruń, 1967b; Iłowiecki, 1964; Kaden, 1964). Western parapsychology was also addressed; yet, for political reasons, it was the development of parapsychology and political changes in the USSR that played a pivotal role in reintroducing the subject into the public discourse in Poland. Furthermore, parapsychology could be reconciled with science fiction, as several of Krzysztof Boruń’s novels show. The link between paranormal phenomena and the natural sciences also made it possible to restore the memory of the celebrated pre-war medium Stefan Ossowiecki and the parapsychic researcher Julian Ochorowicz (Boruń, 1967a, 1967b; Jaworski, 1965).

The 1970s: Growing Western Cultural Influences and Inspiration from India

The 1970s brought political and cultural liberalisation. Relations with both the West and the Global South intensified, in line with the thesis of an “alternative globalization” taking place in socialist countries (Mark et al., 2020). Despite passport restrictions, more and more people visited Western Europe, the United States, and India, which occupied a special place in the foreign policy agenda of socialist Poland. Thus, the cultural developments typical of the West in the 1970s and 1980s (Campbell, 2007; Tändler, 2016) also occurred, though to a lesser extent, in late communist Poland.

Among the most important inspirations in the field of esoteric practices, one should mention, first, C. G. Jung’s works, which were of significance not only for religious studies and cultural studies, but also astrology (Jung, 1976; Prinke & Weres, 1982). In turn, the most relevant reference points for initiatives such as Akademia Życia (Life Academy), founded by the actress, journalist, and New Age proponent Lucyna Winnicka, were the concepts of American yoga reformers like Leonard Orr (Rebirthing Breathwork), the technique of affirmations, and John F. Thie’s Touch for Health. Important references for esoteric actors in Poland also included publications by West German and French authors, in particular astrologers Hans Genuit and Michel Gauquelin, Freemason Robert Ambelain, as well as Hans Bender, the founder of the Freiburg Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health.

New trends gained popularity in particular in relation to health and well-being. Crucial in this context were cultural brokers who mediated between cultures and acted as conduits for the dissemination of specific ideas, practices, and values. For instance, Winnicka met Orr at the Mind-Body-Spirit Festival in New York in September 1979, and later Orr and several of his collaborators visited Poland. Lech Emfazy Stefański, a key actor in the Polish esoteric milieu and participant in major congresses for psychotronic² research in Prague, Monte Carlo, and Tokyo, also deserves mention, as does Leszek Weres, a Fulbright and Kosciuszko Foundation scholar in the United States in the 1970s and then a leading promoter of astrology in late and post-socialist Poland. In general, exchange

² *Psychotronics* was supposed to be a new science, free from parapsychology’s shortcomings; the term was coined by Zdenek Rejdak.

opportunities with other, especially foreign, actors in the field of esotericism were of substantial relevance.

The interactions with Far East, particularly India, also had a noticeable impact on cultural and everyday life in Poland, to mention celebrities visiting ashrams and healers in the Philippines and India, press articles on these subjects, and the traction gained by yoga, transcendental meditation, and a holistic approach to humans (Aleksandrowicz, 1973; Lang & Arend, 2023; Maharishi, 1977; Michalska, 1972; Wierzbicki, 1974; Winnicka, 1983, 1986). Notably, Asian influences were interwoven with and filtered through those from the West, offering support to a society struggling with poor living conditions, a health crisis, and nature's degradation (see Koczmarek et al., 1985). All this resulted in a greater demand for individual autonomy and a better quality of life, and in a new environmental awareness (Winnicka, 1981). Also meaningful in this connection is a huge enthusiasm for energy healing (*bioenergoterapia*) (Marszał, 1975; Winnicka, 1976; Sadowska, 1979).

In literature, this period witnessed a deepening sensitivity to otherness and difference, which can be seen in the publications of Maria Janion and her students (Janion & Rosiek, 1981; Helbig, 1995). Moreover, some writers addressed esoteric and related topics in their works (Białoszewski, 1984, pp. 274–284; 2012, pp. 287–289; Mraß, 2005; Stańczakowa, 1982, pp. 263–279; Waniek, 1984, 2015).

The 1980s and the Further Rise of the Esoteric Community

The esoteric community was on the rise when martial law was imposed, paralysing not only cultural life. Yet, the milieu's activities intensified after martial law was lifted, which was linked to increased public interest in and demand for esoteric practices. Here, three developments seem especially important. First, the censors allowed several esoteric periodicals to be published, in particular *Problemy Astrologii* [Issues of Astrology] (which appeared annually in 1980–1989), *Biuletyn Psychotronika: Trzecie Oko* [Psychotronic Bulletin: The Third Eye] (1984–1988), *Różdżkarz* [Dowser] (1984), and *Problemy Zjawisk Nieznanych* [Issues of Unknown Phenomena] (1985–1989); the last three titles were monthly magazines. These periodicals had print runs between 1,500 and 6,000 copies, and their visual aspect was modest. Yet, they played a considerable part in consolidating

the esoteric milieu. Second, state publishing houses became interested in books on esoteric practices, not least for economic reasons (Herlinger, 1984; Prinke & Weres, 1982; Stefański & Komar, 1980). Third, the New Age movement gained prominence, although the term appeared rarely before 1990. An excellent example of the interplay of heterogeneous beliefs and practices, typical of New Age, is *Trzecie Oko*, featuring articles on alchemy, various systems of astrology, divination, clairvoyance, healing, military research into psychic abilities, yoga, and reincarnation. Despite the striking difference in the quality of the layout, paper, etc., its design and content are reminiscent of such magazines as *Esotera*, *Psychic*, and *The Unexplained*.

Conclusion

The esoteric community in socialist Poland was shaped by local and global forces and processes that interacted with each other in various ways. Situated between the official culture and counterculture, large parts of this community sought the approval of the authorities and a wider field of action. The process of creating “alternative spheres” (Fürst & McLellan, 2017) can be seen as quite successful in the case of Poland, as esoteric practices impacted on several aspects of life, ranging from health to architecture and literature. From this perspective, the eruption of occult topics after 1990 was a continuation of what had been occurring since the 1970s; and also later, various traditions from the West, the South, and the post-Soviet space, where New Age ideas flourished with particular exuberance, merged in the esoteric landscape of post-communist Poland.

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Esotericism in Socialist Poland as a Confluence of Traditions from the East, the West, and the Global South

Summary

This article analyses the esoteric milieu of socialist Poland and the transfer of various ideas and practices that influenced its development. During the period of socialism, this community evolved at the intersection of older traditions and newer trends, related to, firstly, parapsychological research conducted in the USSR and Czechoslovakia, secondly – the increasing fascination with Western culture, and thirdly – the growing influence of the Global South. The late 1970s were already dominated by New Age ideas, although the term itself was avoided. These developments were apparent in the expansion of associations, conferences, and publications devoted to telepathy, dowsing, astrology, yoga, alternative medicine, etc. Importantly, in this way not only esoteric practices were promoted, but also related ideas, attitudes, and values, which influenced various areas of culture.

Keywords: esotericism; socialist Poland; parapsychology; New Age; blending of traditions

Ezoteryzm w PRL jako połączenie tradycji ze Wschodu, Zachodu i globalnego Południa

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje środowisko ezoteryczne w PRL oraz kształtujące je procesy transferu różnych idei i praktyk. W okresie socjalizmu środowisko to rozwijało się na styku starszych tradycji i nowszych tendencji, związanych, po pierwsze, z prowadzonymi w ZSRR i Czechosłowacji badaniami parapsychologicznymi, po drugie – z pogłębiającą się fascynacją kulturą zachodnią, po trzecie – z rosnącym znaczeniem globalnego Południa. Koniec lat siedemdziesiątych stał już pod znakiem New Age, mimo że unikano tego terminu. Przejawem tych przemian były rozmaite towarzystwa, konferencje i publikacje poświęcone telepatii, różdżkarstwu, astrologii, jodze, medycynie alternatywnej itd. Co istotne, popularyzowano w ten sposób nie tylko praktyki ezoteryczne, ale także pokrewne im idee, postawy i wartości, które oddziaływały na różne dziedziny kultury.

Słowa kluczowe: ezoteryzm; PRL; parapsychologia; New Age; przenikanie tradycji