

Padraic Kenney. *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists 1945-1950*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997. xv + 345 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3287-3.

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The Irrepressible Working Class

Whenever one reads an article hailing the recent opening of communist era archives in East Central Europe, it almost inevitably launches into a discussion of the possibilities for research into the “high” politics of the Cold War. Less discussed—but just as important—is the availability of new sources for social history research. In *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945-1950*, Padraic Kenney uses a wide range of recently-opened archives to examine the experiences of workers in Poland from the end of World War II to the onset of Stalinism. For his research, the author collected evidence not only from the state archives in Warsaw, but also from regional and factory archives in Wroclaw and Lodz.

Defying Zbigniew Brzezinski’s “rigid totalitarian model” for postwar Poland,[1] with its emphasis on high politics and political repression, Kenney argues that “workers were not helpless victims of an omnipotent state and a diabolical ideology, but resourceful shapers of their own destiny, able to turn a system to their own advantage and lessen its crueler aspects” (pp. 2, 336). “Although the communist state,” he concludes, “was hardly the product of native social aspirations, Polish society did affect the nature of the transformations of 1945-50, forcing the regime to evolve in response to social demands” (p. 1).

Kenney begins with a comparison of workers in the very different communities of Lodz and Wroclaw in 1945-47. For the author, these years marked the first of two revolutions; at this point, the economy was transferred “from private or Nazi hands into the hands of the state,”

while workers and peasants were “anointed” the new ruling class. In Lodz, the new communist state confronted an established working-class community—what the author calls a “moral community,” based on E.P. Thompson’s “moral economy”[2] of shared values, enabling “collective...spontaneous action against those whom the community holds responsible for disrupting its ability to maintain a standard of living” (p. 6). Despite the state’s rapid takeover of unions and factory councils after the war, the idea of worker self-management remained firmly embedded in the consciousness of workers in Lodz. Lacking formal organization, they spontaneously struck in 1945-47 whenever factory management encroached upon their “moral community,” e.g. by providing low wages or insufficient rations or by punishing on the job theft (to workers, a basic right in a time of need). Optimistically equating nationalization with worker control, they also struck in 1945 when the state tried to reprivatize certain enterprises. By 1947, however, the Polish Workers’ Party (PPR) and the state had replaced prewar management as the target of worker disaffection. Drawing on their sense of national identity, workers began labeling local managers and bureaucrats “Germans,” “Nazi collaborators,” or, most often, “Jews.”

Resistance in Lodz to the PPR’s encroachment on worker control culminated in the “great strike” at the Poznanski textile works in September 1947, a previously neglected chapter in the history of the Polish People’s Republic. Women textile workers struck in response to the introduction of “multimachine work,” or management demands that they work multiple looms. In the absence

of formal organization (unions and factory councils had been traditionally dominated by skilled male workers), the unskilled women workers and their “moral community” assumed the leading role in the strike.

Even before the strike, the women had effectively used their role as mothers to protest speedups, night shifts, shortages, and a lack of child care. During the strike, a group of women staged a mass fainting when confronted by a PPR activist; a rumor rapidly spread through Lodz that a pregnant woman had been kicked and several others killed. Within a few days, at the height of the strike, eighteen factories stood still in Lodz. In the end, the authorities succeeded in breaking the strike by locking the women out. The women workers’ “moral community,” which encompassed not only the factory, but also their church and homes, had prevented them from occupying the plant. Although the workers in Lodz were forced to cede control of production to the new authorities, Kenney argues that the state responded to their material demands on its own terms, with the “labor competition that expanded rapidly after the Poznanski strike” (p. 134).

While workers in Lodz drew upon their sense of community to resist and reshape state policies, in Wroclaw such a “moral community” did not exist. A frontier mentality reigned in the former German city. Virtually all the Poles in Wroclaw were migrants: peasants from villages in central Poland, expellees from Poland’s eastern territories (annexed by the Soviet Union), or returnees from slave labor in Germany. A self-selected group, often lacking family ties, many had come to take over the apartments or plunder the possessions of retreating or expelled Germans. The lack of workers’ traditions in the factories allowed the new directors to act as if they owned the factories and to “violate pay and food supply regulations at will” (p. 145). In contrast to Lodz, even national identity, Kenney argues, did not provide a rallying point for Polish workers. The identity of the migrant Poles centered on the region from which they came; if the large-scale presence of Soviet soldiers, Germans and Jews (having settled in the border region after their liberation from the concentration camps) offended the national sensibility of the new arrivals, they most often returned to “Poland” proper.

The lack of an overarching community and worker traditions in Wroclaw presented the PPR with an unprecedented opportunity to remake worker culture. In contrast to Lodz, membership in the PPR in Wroclaw was the rule rather than the exception. Joining the PPR,

workers assumed, was a prerequisite for obtaining a job. “(T)here was no alternative method,” Kenney writes, “of making one’s way in the city and the factory (p. 173).”

This did not mean, however, that workers in Wroclaw were quiescent. Although strikes were exceedingly rare, the new Polish workers, mainly peasants, brought with them a strong tradition of individual passive resistance to taxes and work requirements. Theft, looting, and the black market were a bane to discipline in factories. According to Kenney, the strongest weapon available to Polish workers in Wroclaw was the labor market. The ready availability of jobs in the western borderlands meant that the new workers, most of whom were single and alone, could easily move between factories. The labor culture of Wroclaw, rather than the long established traditions of Lodz, became more typical of Poland as new workers flooded into the cities from the countryside. Passive resistance and the circumvention of rules and bureaucracies, rather than strikes, would become the norm for working class resistance.

According to Kenney, a second revolution took place in 1948-50, “the party’s revolution,” in which “the communist party gained ascendancy over the Polish state and Polish society (p. 4).” To gain legitimacy and attain its goal of a “participatory yet conflict-free society” (p. 337), Kenney argues, the new state had to reach some sort of rapprochement with the working class. “(R)epression alone,” the mainstay of the totalitarian model, “could not raise productivity, at least not to the levels required for the ambitious industrialization and modernization that were part of the stalinist project” (p. 338).

To prove his argument, Kenney focuses on the ways in which the communist state tried, on its own terms, to respond to worker concerns and, conversely, the ways in which workers shaped and interpreted state initiatives to their own ends. For example, the so-called “Battle over Trade,” launched by the PPR in 1947 to combat alleged speculation and profiteering, reflects for Kenney not only an effort to clamp down on the private sector, but also a response to workers’ anger over prices, shortages, and trade in general. Although the “battle” proved popular with workers, the state’s efforts to divert all responsibility for economic problems to the private sector failed. Workers turned the rhetoric of the “Battle over Trade” against the state itself, using terms like “speculator, reactionary, and red bourgeoisie,” even while the state exploited the same language to label recalcitrant workers “saboteurs” and “labor malcontents” (p. 200).

Similarly, labor competition, a system borrowed from

the Soviet Union in which workers raced each other to fulfill and over-fulfill work norms, “proved surprisingly conciliatory toward workers’ demands for a higher standard of living” (p. 238). To encourage participation, the state initially focused on the monetary rewards and status that hero-workers might obtain. Many workers treated the competitions as a “progressive piece rate”; others used their ties to foremen and supervisors, as they had before the war, to fix the results by counting their work twice, producing smaller sections of cloth, and similar ruses. While some younger workers gloried in the monetary and other rewards of avant garde status, older workers proved resistant to the changes; slowdowns, if rarely strikes, were the result.

In the end, labor competition did little to increase productivity. “Competition,” Kenney notes, “was a poor substitute for better technology and worker training and often distracted from the business of production....Labor competition could pit the party and the hero-workers against management. For example, competition discouraged changes in product lines because workers engaged in setting records did not have time to learn new systems” (p. 268). Partly under pressure from workers, the communist state introduced a pay reform in January 1949 that leveled wages and eliminated most bonuses associated with labor competition. Nevertheless, the legacy of labor competition, Kenney concludes, was an “inordinately high cost of labor because the state feared to rescind too much of what it had given.... The returns the state received for ‘competitive’ labor declined until eventually the regime went bankrupt, bled to death by (among other things) the wages workers had extracted” (pp. 385-86).

The state’s greatest failure under Stalinism, Kenney argues, was its inability to eliminate workers’ “separate and antagonistic class identity” with regard to Poland’s new “managerial-bureaucratic class” (pp. 288-89). With the goal of eliminating class conflict from the public sphere, the state assigned caricatured roles to workers in its propaganda, emphasizing their role as loyal, productive servants to the Polish workers’ state. Such images backfired to the extent that workers used them to assert their own separate identity on the shop floor. For example, labor avantgardists expected to be treated like a new labor aristocracy, while older workers manipulated the image of the experienced “working stiff” (*robociarz*) to reassert their former influence and sense of community in the workplace. Attempts to blur class lines by introducing prewar “staged culture” into the workplace with free tickets to concert, dances and films often failed; all too often, the regime had to resort to the “previous tradition

(for workers) of light fare and classics” (pp. 315-16).

Particularly illustrative of the state’s failure to gain workers’ acquiescence to a new, conflict-free identity were their attitudes towards the organized holiday trips (*wczasy*) promoted by the state. Part of the “forced interaction” of Stalinism, the goal of the vacations, in which people of all social strata took part, was to dissolve existing class barriers. Many workers, preferring to spend their vacations at home, refused to participate; they viewed such excursions as a “distinctly bourgeois form of leisure” (p. 325). Those who did participate socialized for the most part with other workers. *Wczasy*, Kenney concludes, “reflected the way in which workers, while asserting their equal worth as individuals, defended the importance of division by class. Their recognition of the unequal relationship between classes sometimes signified interest in upward mobility, but also indicated their belief in the value of class conflict and separation” (p. 329). Having been forced to concede the public sphere to the party, workers retreated into their private identities, based on community and class. Discipline would remain a problem for the party in the factory even in the era of “high” Stalinism (1950-55), and workers’ identity would reassert itself in calls for workers’ control of production in the string of crises (1956, 1981, 1989) on the road to communism’s collapse.

In general, Kenney succeeds in demonstrating that Polish workers were not “helpless victims” of the communist state. They did influence communist policies and their application; they did “turn the system to their own advantage and lessen its crueler aspects.” More importantly, they maintained their antagonistic class identity, rooted in prewar traditions. This class identity would continue to express itself in “everyday forms of resistance” (James Scott),[3] and provide a basis for organized resistance at key turning points in the communist era. Kenney joins Jeffrey Kopstein, John Connelly, and others in demonstrating the continuity of prewar traditions during the communist period and the limits of Stalinist repression.[4] He thus makes an important contribution to historicizing the period of communist rule in east central Europe. In terms of Polish historiography, his work stands as a welcome corrective to the “civil war” interpretation of the years 1945-47, with its near-exclusive focus on armed resistance and the demise of party politics, and the totalitarian model for the ensuing years, with its focus on the repressive policies of a seemingly omnipotent state.[5]

Nevertheless, Kenney almost inadvertently tells a

second, yet equally compelling narrative about the years 1945-50: the communist state's progressive repression of the Polish working class, from the *Gleichschaltung* of its prewar institutions through its retreat into private life. Were the "Battle over Trade" and labor competition truly a state response to workers' concerns? The appearance of similar measures throughout the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe at roughly the same time suggests different origins. Although workers were clearly demanding regulation or even nationalization of the private sector, the state was also manipulating their opinions, as witnessed by the "well-publicized scandals of embezzlement and hoarding" during the Battle over Trade (p. 195).

Repression also clearly played a role in workers' acceptance of labor competition. Why did the workers at Poznanski strike in 1947, but not in 1949, when the state moved to introduce a nine-hour day? The critical difference, Kenney concedes, was an increase in state repression, which he generally neglects. For example, he mentions the introduction of a Law on Socialist Work Discipline in June 1950, with sanctions for absenteeism, but fails to examine its application. In general, in his eagerness to find "indigenous contexts" (p. 1) for the transformations of 1945-50 in Poland, Kenney systematically downplays the role of repression, manipulation, and the Soviet Union. What he finds is an unlikely portrait of Stalinism without Stalin, "Stalinism" with a small "s." [6]

In conclusion, Padraic Kenney's *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945-1950* marks an important contribution to the historiography of the communist era in east central Europe. It provides a needed corrective to earlier interpretations of Polish history from 1945-50, focused on Soviet influence, "high" politics, political repression, and armed resistance. The reader needs to keep this background in mind, however, in order to put Ken-

ney's work in perspective.

Notes

[1]. Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, eds., *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

[2]. E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York, 1991), chapters 5 and 6, as cited in Kenney, p. 6, footnote 13.

[3]. James Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," in *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, ed. Forrest Colburn (Armonk, NY, 1989), 3-33, as cited in Kenney, p. 6, footnote 12.

[4]. Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945-1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); John Connelly, "Students, Workers and Social Change: The Limits of Czech Stalinism," *Slavic Review* 56 (Summer 1997), 307-35. Also see Kenney, p.3, footnote 5.

[5]. See, for example, John Micgiel, "Coercion and the Establishment of Communist Power in Poland, 1944-1947," (Columbia University dissertation, 1992), and Krystyna Kersten, *Narodziny systemu wladzy: Polska, 1943-48* (Warsaw, 1984), as cited in Kenney, p. 28.

[6]. In footnote 4, p. 3, Kenney writes, "I have used the term *stalinism* in lowercase throughout the book in an effort to separate the system from its founder."

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