The opening sequence of East Punk Memories depicts Papp Zoltán György of the band QSS singing “You’re just a street kid, you’ll never be a party secretary!” and “Maybe you don’t even exist, you don’t want this life anymore!” from a 1980s underground concert in Budapest. The film cuts to the present with György telling the camera, “It’s hard to tell a Western how to fight communism when so many want it back.” In the first few minutes of the film, György sets the tone for the next fifty-one minutes. Lucile Chaufour directed the film, combining concert footage she filmed in the 1980s with a Super8 camera and recent interviews with a dozen former punk musicians. Using first-person narration that is broken up by concert footage, the film is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the translation of Anglo-American punk in communist Hungary, while the second part explores life twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of nostalgia.

The first half of the film focuses on the 1980s punk scene. The former punks recount their introduction to Western music. During this period, Western music was either heavily censored or banned. Punks acquired music from records smuggled into Hungary and copied from the original recordings. Kelemen Balázs, a former punk, recalls that having the banned music gave you prestige among peers. This leads to an intriguing point brought up by the film, the cultural translation of Anglo-American punk ideology in communist Hungary. In the West, punk was a reaction to capitalism and its failures. Western punks tended to be anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian, leaning to the Left in the political spectrum. However, this initial idea was lost on Hungarian punks. They acquired copies of the records but none of the Western anti-fascist punk subculture literature.

Language also represented another barrier in the translation of Anglo-American punk to Hungarian youths. Not everyone could speak and read English, and lyrical content was easily misunderstood. First-wave (1974-78) American punk bands were a reaction to the 1970s overly produced and commercialized rock bands, such as Kiss. These early punk bands were a return to stripped-down garage bands with DIY (do-it-yourself) attitude. The Ramones, a perfect example of this era of American punk, did not have a political agenda in their music. Former Hungarian punk Mozsk Imre recalls that punks were looking for hidden fascist meaning in the Ramones’ lyrics because they “wanted to believe they were right wing.” So why were they looking for a fascist interpretation of punk music? Several former Hungarian punks stated that it was due to being occupied by the Soviet Union and having communist ideology forced on them. In turn, the punk scene oriented itself rightward, toward nationalism and fascism. The Hungarian punk subculture was largely made up of teenagers with little understanding of politics. However, they knew that life in communist Hungary meant they were not free to walk the streets without being harassed. Seeing images of the British punk band the Sex Pistols wearing swastika arm bands gave Hungarian punks the idea that if British punks are fascist then it was okay for them to be too. Lost on them due to not having knowledge of punk culture was the fact that the Sex Pistols wore the swastika as a symbol of provocation to their parents’ World War II generation.

The first half of the film does an excellent job of placing Hungarian punk into the broader political context and using first-person narration to connect the story to the audience. The insights provided by former Hun-
garian punks demonstrate the power of punk culture to speak globally to youths who feel alienated from their society. It also shows how punk can mutate based on location and political context. The film does lack a discussion of the government’s attempts to control the scene with a less authoritarian hand when punk emerged in Hungary. In March 1981, the state turned to the “Three T-Principle” of “Tiltá, Tûrés, Tûmogatás” or “ban the dangerous, tolerate the objectionable, and promote the acceptable.”[1] This tactic worked for a while, but a new wave of punk bands popped up in the underground scene that could not be tolerated to the point that the Budapest punk scene led Yugoslavian officials to demand that Hungary take action.[2] Furthermore, the film does not provide any context for current Hungarian punks.

The second half of the film centers on the question of what life was like after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. At first it was a period of hope and then came the expectations of living in a capitalist society. In the beginning, the ability to talk freely and engage with politics signaled a new era for some of the former punks interviewed who had engaged with local politics. However, the initial optimism was checked after one to two years of privatization. The divide between the Hungarian wealthy and poor grew larger with each passing year. Through this dialogue, the film shows the rise of nostalgia for life under the Soviet era. Several former Hungarian punks point out that while they do not want to live under that regime again, there was a certain standard of living that, while not great, did not have such vast inequality. For some Hungarians, privatization led to the polarization of wealth and the loss of healthcare within two years. Punk musician Horváth Attila attributes privatization of the workforce to his father’s premature death at sixty-five. His father had been living a comfortable life prior to the collapse, but as with many people, his pension decreased and access to healthcare became harder to obtain.

The release of East Punk Memories coincides with the release of another Soviet-era punk documentary, Traces in the Snow. Released in 2015, the film documents the Siberian punk. The Siberian punk, as with the Hungarian, was outwardly anti-Soviet in attitude and lyrical content. This is opposite of the punk scene found in Leningrad and Moscow, which had a more apolitical stance. Both films highlight that while Western punk ideology is grounded in an anti-establishment and anti-capitalist stance, it can transcend political ideology and be grafted onto the universal alienation youths feel globally. East Punk Memories demonstrates that punk can be universal and adaptable to non-Western countries. The film is somewhat unfocused; the title only accurately describes the first section of the film. The real focus is on their lives after music and experiences of the Soviet collapse and the transition to a market economy. There are only a few passing mentions of the punk in the second part of the film. Overall this film is a worthy addition to the growing scholarship on colonial and postcolonial studies of punk youth culture over the past decade. East Punk Memories provides new insights for scholars and a general audience into how anti-capitalist Western punk can mutate in communist societies. However, having a basic understanding of punk culture and the history of Hungary is needed since the film assumes that the viewer is knowledgeable in both areas.

Notes

[2]. Ibid., 175.

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