



Michał Murawski. *The Palace Complex: A Stalinist Skyscraper, Capitalist Warsaw, and a City Transfixed.* New Anthropologies of Europe Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. Illustrations, maps. 376 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-03994-1.

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Michał Murawski's book is an ambitious anthropological biography of Poland's tallest and most infamous building, the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. Shortly before his death, Joseph Stalin "gifted" this building to the Polish people; ever since it was inaugurated in July 1955, the Palace has occupied a large area in the center of Warsaw, visually dominating the country's capital. There are several reasons behind the building's notoriety. The Poles really did not want the Palace but got it anyway (Murawski recounts an anecdote that Stalin gave Poles a choice, and they opted for a metro instead). The Polish state partly paid for it. Built in the style of so-called Stalinist gothic, the building resembles closely the seven skyscrapers erected in Moscow but stands out like a sore thumb in Warsaw's cityscape.[1]

Most importantly, the "gifting" took place shortly after World War II, when Soviet-backed communists were gaining power throughout Eastern Europe, often relying on terror and deception. The new authorities eventually enabled the re-making of political, economic, and cultural institutions on the Soviet model, ceding much political autonomy to the Kremlin and readjusting postwar national economies expressly to the needs of the Soviet state. Earlier, in the nineteenth century, the tsars liked to plant ostensibly Russian architecture

in the Polish capital to assert imperial hegemony. [2] It should not surprise, then, that the Palace of Culture and Science turned out to be a controversial gift. At best, it seems gratuitous and aesthetically artificial; at worst, it serves as "a statue to slavery," making mockery of many Poles' suffering and humiliation under Moscow's rule (p. 6).

Murawski knows all this, but he also argues provocatively—and compellingly—that when measured against the original purposes and designs, the Palace has been a success. For, beyond its deep symbolic value, the Stalinist skyscraper was also conceived as a focalizing social space. The Palace today, the author shows, remains broadly true to its original designation. Thirty years after the transition away from communism, and well into the second decade of heated discussions about its fate, it continues to dominate Warsaw with its superior height in spite of several modern, capitalist skyscrapers that were built around it since the dismantling of socialism. The surrounding area, known as the Parade Square, "is still the biggest urban square in Europe" (p. 7). The residents of the capital admit to having a Palace "complex"; they talk and think about the building constantly, pointing to "the Palace's irredentist tendency to extract itself from within its own walls" (p. xiii). More importantly,

the Palace "plays host to four theaters, two universities, a multiplex cinema, the headquarters of the Polish Academy of Sciences, a three thousand-seat Congress Hall, the meeting room of the Warsaw City Assembly, numerous departments of the municipal administration, a Palace of Youth (featuring a spectacular, marble-clad swimming pool), and the offices of many private companies, as well as a dance academy and myriad restaurants, pubs, cafes, and nightclubs" (p. 7). Murawski has a point. Surprisingly, the majority (61 percent) of his field respondents to a survey he carried out in late 2000s were well disposed toward the Palace, and an even greater number (80 percent) were against destroying it, a once popular sentiment. The Palace remains "a focal point for Varsovians' fascinations, fantasies, and everyday lives" (p. 8).

To establish functional and aesthetic continuities between the Palace's pre-history and post-socialist afterlife, Murawski devotes the first three chapters to the Palace's early history, examining the experiences and writings of Józef Sigalin and Edmund Goldzamt, the building's designers and bright stars of Poland's Stalinist architectural universe. While acknowledging the duo's complicity in "the political machinations" of the day, the author emphasizes their genuine effort to contribute "to the enormous task at hand—the creation of a new, socialist capital city on the rubble of the old one" (p. 31). Drawing on Goldzamt's scholarly books and often on Sigalin's three-volume memoirs ("an excellent ethnographic record of the time" [p. 33]), Murawski reveals them as individuals who have articulated their own visions for the city within, and sometimes against the grain of, the ideological standards of Marxism, and Communist-Party-mandated doctrine of "socialist realism." For instance, Goldzamt seemed less interested in the ways city centers embody "hegemonic social norms" and more in their potential to shape social processes and norms (p. 34). Like the German expressionist architect Bruno Taut, Goldzamt saw the Palace less as a symbol of political power and more as an architectural "crown" that would

unify the city functionally and visually (p. 35). It should be noted that the Stalinists' post-Stalinist enunciations of their own roles and intentions are notoriously unreliable, because most of these authors had stakes in showcasing their role in resisting the "Sovietization" of Polish culture. Murawski does not seem to address this question. However, he disaggregates the Palace from Stalinism in other ways: for instance, by showing that the unifying effect of the Palace not only dovetailed with the plans of interwar architectural modernists, such as Szymon Syrkus, but also mirrored Western postwar European efforts to reorganize the partly destroyed, partly rebuilt and chaotic city centers in a more rational manner. Goldzamt also saw Soviet-style skyscrapers as differing from American ones in the ways they were more synchronized with the city as a whole. Plowing through various concepts advanced by anthropologists, historians, and philosophers, and drawing on interviews, documents, and rich ethnographic material he collected, including Warsaw's local lore, Murawski shows that in and out, the future Palace continues to function as a "condenser" meant to focalize not only Warsaw's political but also social and cultural life (p. 50).

It is somewhat more difficult to accept uncritically another claim, based largely on Sigalin's recollections, that the Palace was meaningfully adapted to Polish style and Warsaw's scale; indeed, Murawski briefly calls out Sigalin's 1986 explanation that no single building could have been really classified as being in Warsaw scale as "teleological relativism" (p. 83). It is to Murawski's credit that he is willing to acknowledge that at least to some extent, the socialist-era critics of the Palace, such as writer Leopold Tyrmand, who saw the Palace as an intrusion, were partially justified.

Effective is Murawski's ethnographic research showing the building's visual, semiotic, and functional centrality to the social and cultural life of the capital. Striking is also the author's juxtaposition of the Palace's afterlife with that of socialist-

era strictly political monuments, such as that of Feliks Dzierżyński, the founder of Soviet *Cheka* (the infamous security police and the predecessor of the KGB). Maintaining and even enhancing its original role, the Palace successfully outlived socialism, a topic covered in the second half of the book. "Soviet friendship is no more," argues Murawski, "but the Palace's semiotic (and nonsemiotic) bond with Warsaw has increased in intensity" (p. 133).

But why exactly is it possible? Why has the Palace "triumphantly transcended the implosion of its guarantor regime" (p. 7)? This more complex question is central to the book. It is a good one, especially since, as the author also notes, many scholars (particularly in the areas of material culture and architecture) continue to see failure as the defining and most fascinating aspect of state socialism. Murawski's explanation is twofold.

The first is historical and descriptive: people made choices, half a century ago and yesterday. Some tried to overcome the Palace's strong architectural and symbolic personality derived from its enormous size, central location, and Stalinist origins, but they did not get far. Radosław Sikorski, Poland's provocation-prone former minister, suggested destroying the Palace on multiple occasions, but Varsovians generally dismissed that as "crazy talk" (p. 170). Barely avoiding privatization (to the Polish American businessman who offered to buy it from the state), the Palace was given to the Warsaw municipality in the spring of 1990. The city's successive mayors actively shaped the building's public perceptions and its role. Thus, Mayor Jan Rutkiewicz claimed that he had legalized a sprawling commercial shantytown on the surrounding Parade Square "to desanctify the Palace" (p. 148). Mayor Paweł Piskorski thought of the Palace as a "town hall tower" that would "integrate" the city's inhabitants, a successful effort, in Murawski's view, and one that resulted in its "incorporation into the landscape of Warsaw's civic intimacy" (pp. 151, 153). Mayor Marek Balicki

aimed to "turn the Palace into Warsaw's town hall," and went as far as to run his electoral campaign from its marble halls (p. 155). Murawski is justified when he concludes that "the failure of attempts to overcome the Palace's social stranglehold over Warsaw is, then, in part a function of the Palace's (and its Complex's) own remarkable success" (p. 136). It is a truly fascinating story that challenges a tenacious stereotype, and Murawski tells it brilliantly, judiciously layering literatures from multiple disciplines, his own ethnographic work, and personal anecdotes.

There are some aspects of *The Palace Complex's* other, strictly social-scientific, explanation that I feel skeptical about. The book seemingly builds up toward a theoretical revelation but then resolves somewhat anticlimactically on page 263: "the Palace's creation as a social condenser and its post-1989 consolidation," writes Murawski, "was made possible first only by the Bierut Decree's [reference to Bolesław Bierut, Poland's Soviet-backed president in 1947-52] establishment of an expropriatory property regime and subsequently by the Palace and Square's transferal to municipal public ownership in 1990. But the Palace-Square ensemble will be unable to maintain its existence as a consequential enclave of still-socialist, public spirited urbanity unless it continues to be publicly owned and managed." I read it to mean that the Palace has served best public needs when it was in public hands. That conclusion feels somewhat tautological, or even axiomatic, in my view. Consider another enunciation of the same problem, on page 248. "Is it possible to identify a logic or causality undergirding the Parade Square morass? To attest whether the last-instance determinant of Warsaw-Palace relations manifests itself most clearly through the presiding structures of urban land ownership or broadly understood property regimes?" This answer seems wired into the very question driving the monograph.

It is admittedly unfair to Murawski, but as a historian, I was wondering throughout the book

how wonderfully the story of the Palace would work as a strictly historical narrative—perhaps something in the spirit of Yuri Slezkine's *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (2017). Or maybe this little fantasy is somewhat legitimate; after all, disciplinary choices affect the explanatory thrust of the book. "Too many social scientists," argued historian John Lewis Gaddis a few years ago, "have lost sight of a basic requirement of theory, which is to account for reality. They reduce complexity to simplicity in order to anticipate the future, but in doing so they oversimplify the past." [3] Throughout the book, Murawski effectively interrogates theoretical concepts to discover the various meanings of the Palace. But the book also subordinates empirical detail, with its chaotic contradictions, to the larger goal of a theoretical contribution, which may seem a bit like potentially lost opportunities to think about causality in a different way. So could it be that as a structure that was both Stalinist and functional, the Palace was inherently ambiguous, and that successive owners and curators preferred to fill it with different meanings rather than destroy a building they could effectively use? Could we assign a greater role to chance in the Palace's fate? After all, a Polish American businessman almost purchased the building, and it just so happened that he was unexpectedly killed? Can we trust those who created the building, decided its fate, and then commented on what they themselves did? Citing responses to his own ethnographic surveys, Murawski also concedes that "one aspect of the Palace's design that did fail when measured against the designers' stated intentions was their attempt to incorporate the Polish 'national form' into their design" (p. 159). Is it possible that the Varsovians' greater acceptance of the Palace results from the fact that while the building still evokes the USSR, the Soviet state no longer exists and its successor, Russia, no longer represents such imminent existential threat? A historian might be more willing to explain the building's fate with individual choices, accidents,

and pure inertia of the Palace's continued usefulness, as well as peculiarities with Warsaw's divisive politics. A slightly more historically minded account might have given more attention to archival documentation and be more willing to read critically the book's various protagonists' statements made for interviews or in memoirs.

Lastly, I wonder about the violence and illegality that made the Palace possible but that plays a somewhat ambiguous role in Murawski's upbeat assessment of the Palace as a socialist success. After all, the Palace as a public space was created largely because the land for it had been taken away from private individuals. The optics of Murawski's book resembles broadly the 1960s "revisionist" challenge to the orthodox historians of the USSR and of the Cold War. The revisionists focused on the ways, once in place, the Bolshevik regime catered to genuine needs of millions of people in the USSR. The traditional historians tended to emphasize the violence and deception that accompanied the establishment of the Bolshevik regime. The Palace's history speaks to these exchanges with the question it raises: is the public good, which the Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science arguably represents, legitimate, or even desirable, when its basis is, essentially, a crime? Or, to piggyback on some of the critiques of the revisionist positions, can a revolution that benefited millions of people be considered legitimate when millions of those who considered it illegitimate had been murdered or sent to camps? This moral issue will, or at least should, figure prominently in the continued discussion of the successes and failures of state socialism at a time when the obvious failings of capitalism and fragility of liberal democracy inspire a renewed search for alternatives.

Notes

[1]. Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 116-17; and David Crowley, *Warsaw* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 38-47.

[2]. Grzegorz P. Bąbiak, "Pomniki władzy w krajobrazie Warszawy XIX i XX wieku: Od Soboru Newskiego do stalinowskiego Pałacu Kultury," in *Pałac Kultury i Nauki: Między ideologią a masową wyobraźnią*, ed. Zuzanna Grębecka and Jakub Sadowski (Cracow: Nomos, 2007), 31-50.

[3]. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 71.

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