

In Search of Another Knowledge: Western Esotericism in Communist Poland

In popular depictions of esoteric practices, a fortune teller woman in a dark room with lots of candles pulls up her Tarot cards, or an eccentric man walks through a field with a dowsing rod. However, in the last three decades the academic study of Western esotericism has developed into an independent branch of religious studies and shown that esotericism should be regarded as a bundle of stable patterns of world-interpretation. These patterns of thinking not only promise a "retreat" from the respective present, but also focus on the creation of a new person. Thus, esoteric practices are important means of struggling for autonomy and self-realization, and have a subversive potential.

The project shifts the focus from religious studies to cultural history and literary history and poses the questions about the practices and cultural impact of selected esoteric groups in the People's Republic of Poland, which was, to a large extent, exemplary for the former 'Eastern Bloc'. The research objectives are twofold. The primary objective is to answer the following questions: How did selected esoterically-interested groups develop? What were their relationships with other individuals and circles dealing with esotericism and psi research in Poland and abroad (particularly in Western Europe and the Soviet Union)? Who were the key actors in the process of 'importing' esoteric contents? What were the most important channels and forms of disseminating esoteric knowledge? How did they 'discover' local, Polish occult traditions that had gone forgotten or were silenced after the war? How did the marginalized esoteric discourse negotiated its position within privileged discourse types, such as the scientific discourse and the public discourse, which was dominated by the Marxist 'world-view'? The secondary objective is to develop a multi-method approach for analyzing those processes.

Although the Second World War and the first years of the communist regime considerably impaired the once lively Polish occult scene, local esoterically interested groups emerged already in the late 1940s. During the heyday of Western esotericism and psi research in the 1970s and 1980s, there were a number of smaller societal circles focused on occult and paranormal phenomena, and others with their own publishing houses or working with state publishing institutions, even having access to mass media. And yet, although esoteric groups have played a valuable role in the popularization of specific philosophical ideas, scientific contents and alternative religious discourses that found their reflection in various cultural domains (literature, popular press, visual arts), the asymmetric relations between esotericism and the communist regime institutions, religious institutions (the Catholic Church), the academia, as well as established literary actors have not been sufficiently explored. Also underexamined is the question of the place of post-war Polish occult milieu within the European esoteric community. The project is based on an extensive corpus of autobiographical writings, literary texts, manuals, press articles and archival documents and employs mainly three methodological approaches: (1) models of culture/literature transfer, (2) critical discourse analysis approaches, and (3) in-depth interviews with selected actors involved in the esoteric milieu prior to 1989 that will enable detailed insights into their motivations and activities.