

Unfinished Utopia. Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949–56.  
By Katherine Lebow. Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2013.  
xiv + 233 pp.

Unfinished Utopia is more than what it claims to be in its title. It draws a narrative framework that encompasses the entire socialist period, and this narrative also seeks links between elements of the experiences of the Stalinist years and longer structures of modern Polish history. Choosing a well-defined locality as the focal point also allows Lebow to challenge aspects of the chronology of the Socialist era. Both Stalinism and the thaw of the years of Gomułka after 1956 appear more heterogeneous than the periodization itself suggests.

The six chapters address two major themes. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 are about features of Modernity and modernization as embodied by postwar reconstruction and industrialization in Poland. Chapters 3, 5 and 6 address the problem of resistance against the regime. Lebow argues that the paradox of Nowa Huta serving as one of the major centers of Solidarity in 1970 and in 1980 can be explained by the continuity of the tradition of collective action that was kept alive in the city by local identity and class-conscious worker solidarity. Lebow makes these themes a good read by maintaining a focus in each chapter on individual experiences.

Postwar reconstruction lends itself as a topic for global history. Local elites published plans from 1943 onwards in such distant parts of the globe as India and Italy. Reconstruction as a term was applied to a number of situations throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Europe had to be reconstructed after 1814, the USA after the Civil War, and the world after 1920 and again after the economic crisis. In 1943 the Fabian Society published a booklet that contained essays on various aspects of postwar reconstruction, such as medicine, diet, agriculture and international migration. John Marrock, one of the authors, advised that since planning would be based on science, it must start before the end of the war: “When the fighting ends they will be hungry and exhausted, in no mood for experiments.”<sup>1</sup> Postwar reconstruction was not about reinstating the pre-war world. The Fabian Society, the ministries of India led by the Indian National Congress, and the communist parties of Italy or Belgium and the newly formed Eastern Bloc wished to create a different world. Lebow takes issue with

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1 John Marrock, “Food for Starving Europe,” in *When Hostilities Cease. Papers on Relief and Reconstruction Prepared for the Fabian Society*, ed. Julian Huxley, H.J. Laski et al. (London: Fabian Society, 1943), 79.

the assumption that the craving for normalcy in the postwar world created an atmosphere in which things went back to an earlier stage: “[...] wartime exposure to a wider world had often been compulsory and far from pleasant, this did not necessarily make it easier to settle down again at home with the return to ‘normalcy’” (p.44). She demonstrates that Poland was uprooted, with migrants all over the country, so restoration was not an option.

In this context, the construction of a large steel plant in the vicinity of Krakow in the early 1950s had multiple meanings. It was not only about countering and controlling a stubbornly “bourgeois” city. The plan for such a venture itself carried the long-term dream of Polish Enlightenment about modernization and industry, the strategic need to relocate industrial centers away from the border areas of Silesia, and the zeal of postwar reconstruction. The plans for Nowa Huta were drawn up in the Stalinist period, but this does not automatically mean that they were shaped entirely by monolithic ideas without links or roots. Lebow also asserts that there was no linearity between plan and practice in the course of the construction of Nowa Huta as the first socialist city of Poland. Many planned features remained only on paper and were postponed to later decades, while many unplanned edifices were built. The plan followed the octagonal shape of many Soviet cities, but it integrated the garden city ideal that was an Anglo-Saxon concept and was ideologically ambivalent in the eyes of the communists. In fact, prefab houses erected in the 1970s and 1980s diverge from the initial design, for which Socialist Realism meant neo-renaissance buildings for administrative centers, theatres, central squares and greenness.

Taking Nowa Huta as an archetypal example, postwar architectural reconstruction in the Soviet Bloc differed from the Western experience in that the former took housing as a secondary goal after industrialization. A recent volume shows that governments in Western Europe had ambitious plans to improve the living conditions of the working classes, but they implemented public projects on a smaller scale than planned and supplemented them with compensation and cheap loans that facilitated private initiatives. In the case of Belgian cities, the choice of architects reflected ideological preferences and professional recognition, but the houses that were built were often unremarkable parts of the postwar cityscape.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, housing schemes were not necessarily integrated with industrial projects.

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2 Fredie Flore, “Housing for War Victims, 1946–1948. A Problematic Building Project by the Belgian Government,” in *Living with History. Rebuilding Europe after the First and Second World Wars and the Role of Heritage Preservation 1914–1964*, ed. Nicholas Bullock, and Luc Verpoest (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011), 263–80.

Lebow stresses that Nowa Huta's housing problems were serious throughout the Stalinist period, but the construction project entirely altered the landscape. The gap between insufficient housing and increasing industrial output was extreme in the Soviet Union in the period between 1946 and 1948. David Filtzer has demonstrated that the space available for workers, which was already scarce during the war due to the extensive damage done to industrial cities, actually decreased during postwar reconstruction on average.

Chapters 2 and 4 address two aspects that have dominated much of the social sciences for a decade, but hardly surface in discussions of Eastern Bloc Modernity: migration and emancipation. In his examination of the experience of moving to Nowa Huta, Lebow focuses on non-official documents, primarily the published memoir of a worker, Edmund Chmielinski. A close look at important junctures in the life of this youth leads Lebow to develop a model of identity formation and change between village and urban life (pp.45–50). However harsh housing conditions may have been at the site, the decision to become a member of a youth brigade could signify an immediate rise in standards of living for many simply because they were given new clothes and a clear goal in life. The visibility of the new sense of belonging brought about conflicts with family members who had been left behind and also with local farmers, in other words, with the world that had once been familiar (pp.59–60). Coexistence with local villages could potentially be symbiotic as long as the urban site did not threaten the existence of lifestyles: workers needed meat and liquor that was produced by locals. However, the city more frequently appeared as the disgraceful “other” in the imaginations of inhabitants of nearby villages. Yet it remained attractive as a destination to large sections of Polish society who had lost their standing in their own localities due to clashes with state, imprisonment and large-scale displacements. It was relatively easy to begin a new life at a muddy, chaotic and enormous construction site like Nowa Huta in the early 1950s.

For Lebow, emancipation is yet another theme from the perspective of which the political history of Stalinist years and their relationship to what followed were more ambiguous than textbooks usually suggest. The recent historiography of Stalinist Hungary emphasizes that images of female roles hardly changed in the postwar years and women essentially continued to be associated with domesticity. Mark Pittaway argues that this feature is a key to understanding the emergence of the double economy in the 1950s: income generated in the villages from agricultural produce was at least as important for the household budget as salaries earned at industrial centers. Women hardly entered heavy industry, and they were

almost always poorly paid however vital their contributions may have been to this second economy.<sup>3</sup> This picture also holds also for Poland. The rhetorical model, in which “the new woman extended her traditionally nurturing role beyond the sphere of the nuclear family to embrace not only the nation, but also the wider family of international progress and peace,” effectively meant that the workplace did not destabilize traditional roles (p.100). Lebow also shows that Nowa Huta women played an important role in Stalinist society, since “no other Polish women have ever penetrated so deeply into the sanctum sanctorum of national industry” (p.97). Journalists’ descriptions emphasized that women did not wear makeup, but they wore the distinctive rubber boots, just as male workers did, and thus could easily be distinguished from the bourgeois of Krakow on Sundays in the city. The female metal caster brigade was the only such brigade in the country, and it performed well. Plastering brigades also produced Stakhanovite women. Yet while Nowa Huta female workers had a high standing in the official propaganda, their prospects were limited. Although 11.5 percent of the physical labor force was female, they had little chance of entering vocational schools unless they were well connected. Clerical jobs that required minimal qualifications and fit traditional roles were the most easily available throughout the 1950s (pp.102–5). Lebow points out that late Stalinist and post-Stalinist years bore witness to a setback from this perspective. The casting brigade was dispersed on the grounds that the work that they did was a threat to a woman’s health. While families were under heavy pressure due to lack of housing, inadequate childcare and imbalanced division of labor, after 1956 public opinion blamed Stalinism for these problems instead of addressing them through policies. In this period moral panic regarding sexual life and sexual freedom in the city was on the rise. Lebow shows that changes in policies regarding the “Gypsy problem” were influenced by this sense of moral panic. In Nowa Huta official voices believed in integration through work and guardianship, especially as far as hygiene was concerned, and the official stance acknowledged differences among Roma groups. In the 1960s the new policy focused on policing, force and surveillance. Lebow does not construct an image of Stalinist golden years of social mobility. She emphasizes that many of the instances in which the presence of a Roma population in Nowa Huta was a factor before 1956 involved prejudice and conflict, and she also highlights the ambiguity regarding gender that was

3 Mark Pittaway, “Retreat from collective Protest: Household, Gender, Work and Popular Opposition in Stalinist Hungary,” in *Rebellious Families. Household Strategies and Collective Action in the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, ed. Jan Kok (New York–Oxford: Berghahn Books), 198–228.

present throughout the socialist era. Yet she manages to convince the reader that a simple juxtaposition of ‘bad Stalinist years and policies’ and ‘better post-1956 times’ is misleading for the analysis of gender roles.

Lebow’s vision of resistance against the regime and its successes focuses on continuity rather than miracles (pp.152–77). She shows that Nowa Huta played a vital role in building up the tradition of resistance, even if this may seem paradoxical at first glance. Despite the long dominance of the totalitarian paradigm, the historiography of the Soviet Union reveals a great deal about the problem of resisting the regime. While there is an array of available sources, historians studying Soviet Society have often found themselves compelled to confront the problems of silence and the comprehensibility of speech. One of the outstanding undertakings of recent years is *The Whisperers* by Orlando Figes. The volume, which is based on written memoirs, personal documents and the oral histories of hundreds of families, attempts to decipher the logic of the disintegration of society and the reach of Stalinist oppression. Figes focuses on the contrast between the public reality and the reality that existed as a whisper and hardly found expression, even at the family level. From this perspective, actors remain passive throughout, except during the years of the Second World War, when alienated central rule could not silence individuals to the same extent as it had before.<sup>4</sup>

Sarah Davies, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Lynne Viola have argued that there are a number of voices still to be uncovered. Davies believes that it is possible to some extent to allow these voices to speak for themselves by rearranging police reports. Researchers who believe in the existence of popular protest against the regime accept the content of police reports on the continued presence of a will to uproot it. In this context, the regime fought a successful war for rule over voices, but fear did not triumph over resistance.<sup>5</sup> However, one of the strongest arguments against the resistance thesis is that well-documented dissenters revolted against exclusion, but not against the foundations of the regime.<sup>6</sup> Figes argues that whispers are cries for help from pioneers who broke down during the period of terror, and these whispers do not constitute a fight for freedom.

Labor history of the Soviet Union often addresses the question of resistance, but does not arrive at definitive answers. In 1994 the landmark volume *Making*

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4 Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers. Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

5 Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia. Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

6 Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

*Workers Soviet*, edited by Lewis H. Siegelbaum, was hesitant about theoretical frameworks.<sup>7</sup> A decade later Jeffrey J. Rossmann openly challenged previous wisdom regarding the Soviet Union as a totalitarian society. On the basis of a close analysis of a textile factory, he describes collective action and resistance as mass phenomena during the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Looking at the postwar years, Donald Filtzer found a diffuse form of resistance in evasion and flight. Importantly, he points at vocational training as one of the major sites of such protest.<sup>9</sup> Lebow argues that the potential for resistance stemmed from the faith of part of the population in ideas about a workers' state throughout the 1950s and 1960s that in turn facilitated collective action and also maintained the memory of such action. On the other hand, the protest regarding the cross clearly demonstrates that the idea of rights, and thus the moral economy of Nowa Huta workers, did not match the ideal type of Homo Sovieticus, who should have thought of religion as 'opium.' Lebow also emphasizes the generational aspect of resistance. This feature links Stalinist Poland to global trends of youth culture in the 1950s and creates important cultural bridges among countries of the Eastern Bloc. Although the author pays attention to gestures during moments of conflict and offers a thick description of some of them, she does not list any occasions when youth culture and the moral economy of workers interacted, combined or clashed. She comes closest to this question in Chapter 5 when looking at the "Poem for Adults." In August 1955 Adam Wazyk, a party hardliner, published a piece that wounded Stalinist sensitivities almost as much as Khrushchev's speech did some months later. The poem asserts that Nowa Huta was a political failure where young males were bored and did nothing apart from desperately seek opportunities to copulate with girls waiting for them in their corrupted 'convents,' i.e. hostels (pp.146–7). The critique of Nowa Huta from a dissenting figure rebuked youth culture on the same grounds as the official voices: sexual promiscuity and the number of unwanted children.

Her appreciation of the significance of individual life stories and situations enables Lebow to locate freedom, dreams and struggle in Nowa Huta under Stalinism. She convincingly links many of these to *longue durée*

7 Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Making Workers Soviet. Power, Class and Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

8 Jeffrey J. Rossmann, *Workers Resistance under Stalin. Class and Revolution on the Shop Floor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

9 Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism. Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II* (Cambridge, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

trends of modern Polish history. She uses a variety of archives, though with more innovative readings she could have overcome two problems that arise in the course of her examination. First, she does not render the dynamics of communities within the city perceptible. She makes mention of groups, such as the voluntary brigades, the theater groups, and informal youth circles, but these groups seem to function only as frameworks without internal lives and forces. By showing individuals, she highlights the importance of individual agency and choices in creating new spaces, but she unintentionally confirms the totalitarian model according to which society is atomized. This is in contradiction to her larger narrative about collective action. One way to overcome this paradox would have been to use photographs as archival sources instead of illustrations of arguments. Second, while the change of landscape was the essence of the story of creating a new city, there is no discussion regarding how the rural landscape was transformed into an urban one. At one point we see peasants in conflict with brigades, and in the second chapter she stresses the role of changes in the hinterland of would-be workers, but no picture emerges of the role that was played by environmental change or how an old landscape changed, merged with, or remained part of the city, nor is there any characterization of the new human ecology that replaced the old one. Lebow often quotes descriptions that stress mud. Contemporaries were so preoccupied with getting stuck in the mud that the author seems to have forgotten to consider how it might have looked from a bird's-eye view.

The book is a well presented case study that provides the reader with a firm foundation on which to develop ideas regarding some of the most salient historiographical issues of Stalinism, such as Modernity, the role of the Second World War, repression and resistance. Lebow talks about her actors with empathy and skill. She is good at describing events and personal dramas. She does this with warmth, sensitivity and understanding, but without pathos. And she has chosen themes, including housing issues, moral panic, sexuality, youth culture, and women's emancipation, that make her work useful for those interested in global histories. The book also demonstrates how much an analysis of this period can reveal about the social history of Central Europe. These features make the volume relevant for a large number of students and researchers working on the postwar history of the region.

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