

Did Communist Children's Television Communicate Universal Values? Representing Borders in the Polish Series *Four Tank-Men and a Dog*¹

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Recent research has revealed how foreign television shows being broadcast in Warsaw Pact countries formed a transnational communication space in Cold War Europe.² This chapter goes one step further and argues that the shows made in the West that were also broadcast in the Polish People's Republic inspired domestic television producers to create their own children's series on behalf of the state-controlled television station. The producers managed to reconcile the seemingly contradictory aims of producing a show modelled on examples from the West while meeting the regime's expectations. In this chapter, I focus on the script of the series *Cztery Pancerni i Pies* (Four Tank-Men and a Dog),³ first aired in 1966.

The series succeeded in transposing into the Polish context a mixture of popular television genres imported from the United States and Western Europe. By analysing how this series was judged and adapted for propaganda aims, I reveal how the historical imagination of the nation was negotiated. Moreover, I situate how and why this representation was so willingly consumed by children in Poland and throughout the Soviet Bloc (the show became one of Poland's most popular cultural export products). The regime thus largely (albeit not entirely) imposed a propagandistic version of past events.

My analysis focuses on the representation of borders in the series. In modern statehood, power has been linked to border control. Moreover, Hannah Arendt has argued that in totalitarian regimes, objectivized enemies are more important than ideology.⁴ Border zones constitute an ideal physical space where these enemies can be staged in cultural productions. It should not come as a surprise, then, that scenes taking place at the border are given considerable attention in *Four Tank-Men*.

Conceptualizing (children's) television shows

Historical shows have been conceptualized in different ways in Western and East-Central European television. By the late 1960s, the genre had become a key concept in Anglo-Saxon film theory.⁵ It has also since gone on to become a tool to research children's television shows produced in the West.⁶ According to the *Collins English Dictionary*, 'genre is a particular type of literature, painting, music, film, or other art form which people consider as a class because it has special characteristics.'⁷ Essential to a genre, moreover, is that it consists of socially agreed-upon codes and conventions that evolve over time as they incorporate, respond and adapt to production techniques, marketing strategies and the expectations of the audience.⁸ Mass media products reproduce what has previously met with viewers' enthusiasm, while introducing something new in order to maintain interest. Borrowing from their viewers' world, genres, it has been observed, serve as ideological reproductions of the capitalist system.⁹ Ideology should be understood here as a process of making sense of society in which rulers, sponsors, producers and child viewers are all involved.¹⁰

In studies both on children's television during communism and on communist cultural products for children in general, historians use the concept of propaganda as the central prism for analysis.¹¹ Propaganda distinguishes itself from other types of ideological inflection by influencing the attitude of the audience through deception instead of persuasion. Censorship organs were often set up in communist countries to screen, alter or veto audiovisual productions.¹² As it is aiming to reveal rather than understand, however, such research tends to present a simplistic opposition between regime and society.¹³ The existing literature on children's television does not include genre as a key concept of analysis and therefore gives the impression that propaganda and genre are two mutually exclusive categories of analysis. This chapter shows that the aims and techniques of propaganda and genre could function in a creative tandem, feeding off each other, and eventually melting into each other so as to become almost indivisible.

Television watching in Poland

Four Tank-Men was an immensely popular hit show during communism and beyond, and it won the 1995 Polish public broadcasting television station (TVP) award for the most popular series ever.¹⁴ Viewers have consistently praised this children's series more than they have any series made for adults. Therefore, if we are to understand everyday communist society, turning our lens on children's television is essential. We need to analyse young viewers as not only passive but also active consumers of communist culture.

Poland experienced a spectacular baby boom; by the mid-1960s, 25 per cent of the population was attending school.¹⁵ This configuration had an influence on the emergence of televised youth culture. The Polish broadcasting industry was from its creation in 1952 monopolized by the Communist Party, but its socialist realist template resulted in a disgruntled audience.¹⁶ In 1956, the new leader Władysław Gomułka

and his administration understood that by making television attractive, they could implement their ideological aspiration to exert control over a standardized culture. The latter had the potential to spread among all strata of the population and break down elitist culture. Broadcasting coverage grew rapidly over the years, from 10,000 viewers in Warsaw at the end of 1955 to 78 per cent of the whole Polish population having access to a TV in 1967.¹⁷ By the end of the 1960s, watching television had become a favourite pastime of the masses, including children and youngsters.¹⁸ In remote villages, for example, people either gathered together in order to watch television or, alternatively, shied away from social activities if a television was available at home.¹⁹ In 1967, a study conducted in Poland revealed that only 15 per cent of adolescents did not aspire to have their own television.²⁰

The territorial context in post-war Poland

The most popular children's series *Four Tank-Men and a Dog* featured the adventures of a tank crew fighting in a military unit within the Polish First Army, often referred to as the Berling Army.²¹ In 1944, this army was composed in the Soviet Union and was put under the supervision of the Red Army. The series followed its path from Siberia to Berlin in 1944 and 1945.²² When it was broadcast in the late 1960s, it was already obvious that it falsely represented Polish borders. The 1956 Polish protests had shown that, while communism had utterly failed to win the population over despite its slogans on modernization and social progress, the possibility of finding any way out of Soviet hegemony was just as unrealistic.²³ For the sake of a relative autonomy, it was crucial to tolerate the communist regime and to keep the Polish borders in place. The inherent dilemma of preserving Polish national identity through the acceptance of Soviet hegemony was something Polish citizens needed to live with.

Censored cultural productions often focused on Poland's borders in those years. The country had geographically shifted in 1945, gaining 103,788 square kilometres in the west while losing 214,200 square kilometres in the east. Post-war Poland encompassed the territory between the Oder and Neisse rivers in the west and the Bug River in the east.²⁴ Official narratives presented the Polish post-war border at the Bug as the historic Polish-Soviet border and deliberately glossed over the memory of the recent past in the region east of the river (which had been part of the Polish Republic in the interwar period).²⁵

The Polish-German borderline, on the other hand, was depicted as uncertain and contingent; fear was manufactured over what propaganda dubbed 'German revisionism'.²⁶ The Oder-Neisse borderline had been defined at the Potsdam Conference in 1945, pending an international peace treaty. Said treaty never materialized, and while the Polish People's Republic signed a bilateral agreement with East Germany on the acceptance of this border already in 1950, it did not reach a similar bilateral agreement with West Germany until December 1970.²⁷

A seemingly unsafe Polish-German border, however, was a motivational tool in securing Poland's place on the geopolitical map. Gomułka himself called the Polish People's Republic 'a kind of Slavic bastion', an *antemurale Slavorum*, fighting against

an expansionist West.²⁸ His words aimed to legitimize the Polish authorities. Together with their Soviet friends only, they could defend the population in the case of conflict.

The Polish broadcasting corporation

The regime found in the rapidly growing broadcasting industry a new means of disseminating its message. Polish broadcasting was controlled by state officials but was negotiated with film directors, scriptwriters and actors, as well as with viewers. Defining together what messages could be broadcast, television professionals became co-designers of national education.

Polish broadcasting started to air a permanent children's programme in 1957. Television producers were in a position to pay more attention to education and entertainment than before the protests against Soviet hegemony in October 1956, which resulted in a liberalization of the regime,²⁹ thanks to which educational programming without specific propaganda content, such as the series *Zrób to Sam* (Do it yourself), in which children were taught how to make things (such as a bird table), were launched.³⁰ By the 1960s, however, the children's show supply saw an increase in series with a sharper propagandistic message.³¹ Just as teachers adjusted their teaching to include fear of potential German revisionism, and just as children's authors produced manuscripts addressing nationalist ideology, so too children's television programmes were required to play their role.³² Television series made it easier for children to develop emotional bonds and their episodic nature was more effective at serving propagandistic aims.³³

That change in focus resulted from a new Resolution of the Central Committee on Cinematography of 1959–1960, which restricted anew television producers' freedom and enforced ideological convergence upon them. It also prescribed a more stringent selection of foreign shows.³⁴ Control was institutionalized in a Commission for the Evaluation of Scripts (*Komisja Ocen Scenariuszy*), and from 1967 onwards in a Programme Council (*Rada Programowa*). These organs focused on the way the Soviet Union and Germany were depicted and evaluated the socialist didactic value of productions.³⁵ When a 1962 questionnaire sent out by the Polish television broadcasting station to viewers all over Poland showed that a majority of respondents wished for a reduction in the amount of talk shows and an increase in the amount of sports, movies and fictional programmes,³⁶ state officials opted to prioritize entertainment as a channel for propaganda.³⁷ Additional funds were devoted to the production of fictional television shows underpinning Gomułka's nationalist ideology.³⁸ The Resolution and the work of the Commission for the Evaluation of Scripts overshadowed cultural production and led to artists' conformism.

A hunger for fiction had initially lured viewers to imported and dubbed productions made in the West, but by the mid-1960s, Polish productions were becoming increasingly popular. They managed to transpose to a domestic context what had been attractive for Polish viewers in such shows. Fiction made it possible to play with the meaning of propagandistic messages. In addition, whereas socialist realism had prescribed the heroization of collectives and had reduced the role of individuals, producers now

featured individual experiences against the backdrop of a historical setting.³⁹ Viewers could see themselves in these heroes, or project their dreams onto them, which led to their identification with the state-approved characters.⁴⁰

With the increasing political influence of both army and ex-combatants, an ideology of power in which patriotism and military tradition were foregrounded⁴¹ began to be featured in audiovisual productions. Polish movies for adults often presented a soldier courageously undertaking military actions, fulfilling his obligations in the name of patriotism and often finding himself in extreme situations. With only his innate sense of justice to guide him, he would find the right path to serve the motherland.⁴²

An emblematic series: *Four Tank-Men and a Dog*

Four Tank-Men and a Dog depicted Second World War events with a myriad of historical mistakes, but supported a narrative that gave meaning to Polish nationalist ideology. The scripts were based on a book by Janusz Przymanowski.⁴³ The story reminds me of the English best-seller *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)* from 1889, Jerome K. Jerome's humorous account of a boat journey on the Thames that colourfully depicts subversive leisure-time activities. The book was first translated into Polish in 1912 and was reprinted regularly, but Przymanowski never referred to it as a source of inspiration.⁴⁴

One can easily recognize codes and conventions from several television genres in the series: road movies, comedies and historical war movies, with some of the fighting scenes not out of place in a Western. Just as would happen in a road movie, the show features a vehicle transporting a group of close male friends from point A (the Soviet Union) to point B (Berlin).⁴⁵ As is the case with comedies, the amusing escapades and jokey banter the protagonists enjoy challenge the demands of realism.⁴⁶ Just like in historical films, the content is portrayed as authentically as possible, aiming to glorify the national heritage on screen.⁴⁷ The television series also shares the iconography of a war movie: large-scale battles alternate with individual stories of heroism; while the protagonists are at the heart of the action, the enemy is portrayed as an impersonal other.⁴⁸ Most of all, however, *Four Tank-Men* resembles a Western. The main character gets the better of his enemies by outsmarting them, and he achieves justice for his home country on his journey civilizing the West.⁴⁹ A reason for the Western genre's success in America lay in the fact that viewers were fascinated with the concept of the frontier, which was imagined as a place for an encounter between civilization and the wilderness, between the East and the West. It has even been argued that 'the characteristics of the American intellect – restless energy, practical expediency, exuberance, and individualism among them – are the product' of that encounter.⁵⁰

The archetypal children's Western *Zorro* started to be broadcast in Poland in the early 1960s.⁵¹ In 1964, the head of Polish television programming, Stanisław Stefański, even worried that too many children's series made in the West, such as *Robin Hood* and *Zorro*, were being broadcast in the country, leading to a proliferation of what he called the 'ideal of the American hero'.⁵² The *Zorro* symbol, a capital Z, started to appear on apartment walls and fences.⁵³ The popularity of this series indicated that the

repetition of similar codes and conventions in a domestic children's series could be just as successful. By depicting upbeat skirmishes between easily recognizable good and bad guys, *Four Tank-Men* helped heal a nation traumatized by the Second World War. When in 1968 a journalist asked a little boy what he considered his favourite scene, the boy answered: 'When the Pole punches the Kraut, and when Szarik [Little Grey One – the dog] steals a sausage from the Germans.' The journalist commented: 'In Polish movies, usually we are the ones who are punched and it is our sausage that gets stolen.'⁵⁴

The main protagonist, first tank-man Janek Kos, is a good-looking Polish orphan from Gdańsk who is wandering the globe, searching for his father's grave.⁵⁵ The latter fell in the Westerplatte battle in September 1939, while his mother died when their house was set on fire. In Siberia, Janek finds a little dog and the two become an inseparable pair. A viewer might fall for the illusion that Gdańsk was Polish before the war, or was inhabited by a majority of Poles, and that the city was taken over by Germans after Poles heroically battled them at Westerplatte. In reality, Gdańsk was in the interwar period a free city under the auspices of the League of Nations, and Poles accounted for a minority of the town's population.

Moreover, Janek's fictional search for his father is less innocuous than it might appear. The series glosses over the estimated 200,000 Poles who, like Janek, fled the German-occupied territories towards the east in the autumn of 1939.⁵⁶ Having crossed the German-Soviet demarcation line, they were deported to Siberia by Soviet authorities, as the latter were afraid of potential German spies.⁵⁷ The fictional main character links the symbolic meaning of Westerplatte as a memory site of Polish heroic resistance to the (only partly represented) experience of Polish citizens who found themselves in Siberia during the Second World War. Although his search for his father's grave in Siberia was not strictly accurate, historically speaking, it is precisely this narrative that made him a highly popular television hero.

In Siberia, Janek also meets the second tank-man, the Georgian character Grigorij, not too coincidentally a countryman of Stalin's. After their exchange, they come to the following conclusion: '[This is] my war, your war, our war, one war', a sentence that skates over unpleasant questions about the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland, while accentuating Soviet-Polish friendship.

The third tank-man is Gustlik. Raised in the German-Polish borderlands, he knows German, and this ability will soon prove useful. Any fears this might have prompted regarding his loyalty to the Polish cause are allayed by his having been born by the Vistula, a river often depicted as the Polish nation's symbol.⁵⁸

Scriptwriter Konrad Nałęcki's characters resort to half-truths, deliberate vagueness and repetition of the 'Westerplatte trope' in order to catch children's attention. A look at the Commission for the Evaluation of Scripts' orders shows that these half-truths, vagueness and repetitions were entirely suggested by the scriptwriter, which indicates that he was well aware of how he ought to present content in order to get past the censors.⁵⁹ As Nałęcki was present at the Commission's meetings, this is no surprise. He knew the identity of the people who would be evaluating his script and could anticipate their wishes.⁶⁰

Last in line in the crew is tank commander Jarosz Olgierd (a difference with Przymanowski's book, where the Russian Wasyl Semen was positioned as commander). Olgierd was introduced at the request of the Commission for the Evaluation of Scripts as the grandchild of a Polish migrant who moved to Siberia in 1863. His role was to personify the friendship between Russians and Poles. It also meant that a Polish-speaking person could thus be placed in the position of tank commander, a position that was exclusively reserved to Soviets during the war.

The Commission initiated changes that diluted the Russian identity of the crew in order to bolster its Polishness, thereby overcoming the unpopularity of the Soviet-controlled Berling Army in post-war Polish society.⁶¹ At the same time, it was essential to gloss over the fact that people like Olgierd's grandfather were sentenced to expulsion because of their anti-Tsarist behaviour after the January Uprising of 1863 in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth against the Russian Empire.

The four tank-men come together in the Polish First Armoured Brigade symbolically called the defenders of Westerplatte, as it never fought in Westerplatte. This Brigade was a Polish military unit within the Soviet-controlled Berling Army. The series neglects to mention the fact that the Berling Army was composed of Polish war deportees to the Soviet Union who had not made their way earlier to the bigger army of General Władysław Anders set up under Allied command in the 1941–1942 period, which had left the Soviet Union for Iran and Palestine in March 1942 and was put under British supervision following a British-Soviet-Polish understanding.⁶²

Rewriting history at the bug

The series' content is the result of a compromise between what Polish producers were allowed to achieve within the constraints of the state-controlled broadcasting system and what the young audience expected. This compromise can be seen most clearly in scenes that take place at the borders, namely on the Bug and Oder rivers. The second episode of the series features Janek Kos sitting in his tank in the vicinity of the eastern bank of the Bug on 22 July 1944 and listening to a message on Radio Moscow informing listeners that the Polish Army had crossed Poland's eastern border at the Bug a day earlier, on 21 July 1944, and had just liberated the Polish people.⁶³ The problem with this is that the Bug was not the Soviet-Polish border in the interwar period: it became so only after the war.⁶⁴ The date 21 July 1944 refers to the establishment in Moscow of a provisional Polish government, an important source of legitimacy for communist power in Poland in the post-war period. The news was announced in Moscow and reached Poles via Radio Moscow.

In contrast to the portentous words of the Radio Moscow newflash, the camera reduces the action in the next scene to a tank crew subversively crossing the Bug. The camera zooms in on the four soldiers in their tank – a boy's archetypal favourite toy – and their dog – a child's faithful friend – reaching the river bank.⁶⁵ Whereas in the initial version Gustlik, upon seeing the river, exclaimed: 'We'll soon be in Poland, guys!', the censors required this to be changed to: 'Isn't that the Bug?' in order to provide this new propaganda piece with authenticity, as soldiers of the Berling Army would not have associated the Bug with the Polish border.⁶⁶

As a female Red Army soldier orders the crew to wait while a convoy of Soviet soldiers crosses, Janek and his dog Szarik start to distract the Soviets with tricks.⁶⁷ The soldiers laugh and stop to watch them, creating a traffic jam. The rest of the tank crew then take advantage of the commotion and swiftly cross the river without waiting for permission, blowing kisses to the female border guard. The four men thus outsmart the Soviets, thanks to their Zorro-like escapades, and it is as if their disobedience is justified because they are Poles and therefore are the 'real' liberators. While the Polish vice-minister of culture, Tadeusz Zaorski, called the dog scene absurd, because 'one dog would never be able to hold up a convoy', another member of the Commission pleaded for the scene not to be deleted so as to keep children's attention.⁶⁸

Subsequent research conducted in America has shown that a child's attention is indeed triggered by signals associated with child-oriented content. As children know that these will lead to enjoyable content, they are willing to watch scenes they do not understand or to continue watching when a particular scene does not seem to appeal at first glance.⁶⁹ The waiting and the sulky border guard enforcing unfair rules stress the importance of the border line, but there was little here for a child to enjoy. The Commission members decided to conduct a test screening of the episode, giving children the final say on whether the dog scene would stay in or not.⁷⁰ Now established as co-decision-makers as to how propaganda content was to be consumed, the children voted to keep the scene. The decision-making process behind the dog scene thus shows that a majority of adults involved in the broadcasting decision were so concerned about making television enjoyable for children that they were willing to give them a decisive voice.

On the other side of the bridge, ecstatically happy civilians await the arrival of the crew. Their presence is no accident. It is the result of an intervention from the Commission, which had lamented a 'lack of emotions' in the welcoming party and demanded more enthusiasm from the crowd.⁷¹ As a result, Polish-speaking civilians offer flowers to their liberators and the main characters rejoice in being home. The scriptwriter even introduced a joke so as to optimize Grigorij's Georgian background: he has darker skin because his Polish father was a chimney sweeper, a joke that the Commission members particularly liked.⁷² Janek, in turn, asks around whether anybody has heard of his father. He discovers that all 7,000 Westerplatte soldiers have died. Not only does this discovery ascribe an artificial significance to a battle in which, in reality, only fifteen Polish soldiers died,⁷³ it also creates an artificial continuum between the soldiers who had defended Polish freedom in 1939 and the tank crew restoring it, thanks to their crossing of the Bug in 1944.

Although it is never mentioned that there is a border at the Bug, the whole scene is built on contrasting the two banks of the river. Viewers are expected to laugh at and admire the actions of the tank crew, but not to give a second thought to the notion of the Bug as an incontrovertible border. Throughout the Bug episode, the young public's identification with the heroes of the tank crew and their sympathy for the dog render the occasionally incongruous historical setting somewhat more digestible. But the latter was not without ideological meaning. By ensuring that this backdrop had little in common with history, and much more with the nation's imaginary history, the scriptwriters were able to situate the television series in a Polish context and to

encompass in the show expressions of nationalism that reminded viewers of their place in the world.⁷⁴ Raising this new official narrative beyond the level of conscious awareness accelerated its absorption, as if it were a banal phenomenon that no longer needed to be discussed.⁷⁵

Stabilizing the consciousness of the Western Polish border: The Oder River

The three episodes that take place at the Oder River stage a battle reminiscent of a *Zorro* episode between the good guys (the tank crew) and the bad guys (the eternal German enemy).⁷⁶ In the thirteenth episode, our Polish tank crew operating under Soviet supervision repairs its cannon barrel on the eastern bank of the Oder and tests it by firing off random shots across the river towards the Germans; they hit an ammunition station.⁷⁷ This places their leading Soviet officer in a difficult position, because he is supposed to punish his crew, all the while handing them a medal.⁷⁸

The second scene takes place the following day, when the tank crew erects a wooden pole marking the border on the river bank. This activity answers to an order sent to all members of the Polish People's Army two weeks after the Yalta Conference. However, there is a twist: although this activity aimed to show its support of the 1945 Yalta Treaty, for the benefit of viewers watching in the late 1960s, it also unwittingly brought to attention the western Polish borderlands' insecure post-war status. Grigorij designs a pole representing a Georgian mountain – a symbol from Stalin's native state – and a Polish eagle – the symbol of the Polish state since the Piast dynasty. Grigorij's action has a twofold meaning: to show that the Polish territory encompasses anew the western lands where the Polish state had once arisen and that in the 1960s its security was guaranteed by the Soviet Union.

The message from the first scene is that the tank crew members are spontaneous social actors who are not under the thumb of their Soviet superiors; they are allowed a degree of subversiveness when it comes to defending the motherland. The second scene is considerably more propagandistic, but in combination with its predecessor does not seem quite so out of place. What might appear crudely doctrinaire on its own becomes much more acceptable when viewed directly after a scene depicting charming escapades. The first scene may even grant significance to the second. Viewers could transfer the message from one to the other and be left with the impression that the tank men's initiative to erect a border pole had come straight from the heart and was not just the implementation of an order. The intention informing such a juxtaposition of scenes seems to transform what might initially have appeared to be propaganda into cowboy tricks. Such a representation designed for children seems all the more obvious since such 'spontaneous' practices on the tank crew's part are omnipresent throughout the show.⁷⁹ Later research on children's comprehension of television has indeed revealed that a repetition of practices influences the children's meaning-making process and facilitates their ability to memorize a programme.⁸⁰

Finally, the Battle of the Oder begins. The tank is positioned on a wooden raft and Polish soldiers drag it by hand, holding onto a cable attached to both sides of the river. But the cable snaps and the tank crew is dragged by the current right into the hands of a German commander, with only the dog being able to swim back. Recognizing the cannon barrel with which he had been attacked the day before, the commander makes a bet with them: if the tank-men are able to drive with their tank through a German firing line, they will be set free. Although the tank doesn't survive the ordeal, the crew does, and the four men make their getaway into a wood.⁸¹ Later, they overpower a German watch tower at a water dam and take the watchmen as prisoners of war.⁸²

Surprisingly, one local German watchman, Kugiel, informs the crew that German soldiers are planning to flood the city at the river in order to defend it against the advancing Soviet and Polish troops. The reason for Kugiel's betrayal of his fellow Germans is that he does not want his house to be flooded.⁸³ After a number of skirmishes between the good guys and the bad guys, the tank crew is able to beat the Germans and reach the western bank of the river, thanks to an inspiring combination of courage, ingenuity and sense of fraternity.⁸⁴

The presentation of the character Kugiel is particularly significant. Because of the general emphasis on the irredeemable wickedness of Germans, the depiction of Poland's supposed ideological allies from East Germany proved problematic in the film, as in real life.⁸⁵ In the entire audiovisual collection of the Polish People's Republic, we can find only one movie besides this television series that features a positive East German character.⁸⁶ Kugiel is thus intended to serve as a sympathetic representation of the people of the GDR. Although he lives on the western bank of the Oder, he speaks Polish because he fell in love with a Polish-speaking woman from the city of Piła, who was singing in a Polish church choir. Piła, situated on the eastern bank of the Oder, was part of Germany in the interwar period. It became Polish only in 1944–1945. In contrast to other cities with a similar history, a significant portion of Piła's inhabitants spoke Polish, and the town even had a Polish church choir.⁸⁷ Piła was chosen for the series because it could create the erroneous impression that the Polish western borderlands had always been inhabited by a large number of Catholic Poles. In this way, one could gloss over an unpleasant truth concerning the mass expulsion of Germans in the early post-war years. Kugiel is portrayed as an opportunist, who decides to help Poles because he is sure there is something in it for him. The message for Polish children was that you could cooperate with your East German neighbours, as long as you watched out.

The series' public impact

Four Tank-Men premiered on 9 May 1966 on the commemoration day of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany and became an instant hit. A 1968 opinion poll indicated that 70 per cent of Polish viewers liked the series,⁸⁸ and that by the end of 1974, 7,109,000 individuals had seen it.⁸⁹ The series was also shown in the cinema, with four episodes bundled together; in this format, it attracted 8,343,912 viewers in 1968. It was ranked twenty-fourth on the list of the fifty biggest box-office hits on Polish screens

from 1945 to 2000. This is an impressive result, considering that only five movies from this or an earlier period finished in a higher position – out of these, only three were Polish, and all were made for adults.⁹⁰

The hype it must have created can be felt while reading articles in weeklies such as *Polityka* (Politics), as well as children's magazines such as *Walka Młodych* (The Fight of the Young). From the end of the 1960s onwards, many children from Poland and other Eastern Bloc countries were brought up watching the series. Recently, the series has become a nostalgia consumer product. Many who had been materially better off before the transformations of the 1990s have started to look back fondly to cultural productions from their childhood in search of familiarity and safety.⁹¹ Andrzej Skłodkowski directed a documentary about the staging of the series, Marek Łazarz summarized the fictional content of the series in a book, a privately owned museum was opened and DVD box-sets have been released.⁹² The series has also found a devoted international fan base. The Wikipedia page of the series is accessible in thirteen languages, the Internet Movie Database has a popular fan page and YouTube enables viewers to watch the series at any time.⁹³ The fact that Polish public television has shown the series again in the early afternoon since 2010 proves that Polish children continue to enjoy it.

After 'all those Zorros and Robin Hoods', Polish children in the 1960s finally found their own Polish hero.⁹⁴ The series became a point of reference in children's games: after having played Zorro, children now either wanted to be 'Janek' or were 'in love with Janek'.⁹⁵ Furthermore, it was not only in the living room and schools that children expressed their admiration.⁹⁶ Around 20,000 children joined the newly established *Kluby Pancernych* (Armoured Children's Clubs), which engaged their members in social actions dedicated to the series. Football stadiums were packed with people wanting to meet the actors, and 'hundreds' of letters were written to them.⁹⁷

Television influences social interaction. Whereas some sociologists point to increased cohesion among family members gathered in front of the television, others state that watching television has replaced family interaction and conversation, leading to a swifter exposure of children to the moral values expressed by the television industry.⁹⁸ Watching television also leads to sociological standardization and homogenization. By the end of the 1960s, most Polish children were able to recognize Szarik, the dog.⁹⁹

The life of the series after 1989

Four Tank-Men was shown on a regular basis until 2006, when the director of the National Polish Broadcasting Corporation, Bronisław Wildstein, acceded to the request of a veteran organization (Porozumienie Organizacji Kombatanckich i Niepodległościowych) to stop airing programmes that falsified history. Despite the controversy, private television channel Kino Polska showed the series again in 2007. In 2008, TVP broadcast the series again, now accompanied by a talk show in which film critic Krzysztof Kłopotowski discussed the falsifications with, more often than not, nationalist-conservative historians.

Kłopotowski invited a Russian PhD student from Warsaw University, Viktoria Dunaeva, to discuss the third episode. When she attempted to downplay the propaganda's role by saying that it was merely an 'adventure film for children', Kłopotowski replied that 'the best propaganda (was) adventure for children.' After a heated discussion, he bade Dunaeva farewell with the following words: 'So, all those years of Soviet indoctrination must have had some effect.'¹⁰⁰ Kłopotowski firmly believes that a united Polish society existed during and after the war, which suffered under the yoke of German and Soviet oppression, both occupying forces being equally iniquitous. He and his right-wing allies grumble over the show's heinous propaganda without bothering to examine the reasons for the show's success, nor to look beyond the show's flagrant inaccuracies. Kłopotowski was heavily criticized; one of his articles received more than 78,000 negative reactions online, conclusive proof if it were needed that the series remains immensely popular.¹⁰¹ Fans continue to take pleasure in the show's subversive and adventurous appeal, even while acknowledging that it was a communist television production.¹⁰²

Conclusion

The Polish children's television series *Four Tank-Men and a Dog* first aired in 1966, stimulated feelings of belonging, along with a shared history and set of values, through the fictional adventures of Berling Army soldiers during the Second World War. The dominant paradigms in the historiography of children's television, centralizing the importance of genre in the West and of propaganda in the East, do not enable us to understand the popularity of this state-controlled television series. This popularity extended both in space, that is, throughout the Soviet Bloc, and in time, with the series being shown in Poland almost without interruption from its release until today.

Researching the series with a transnational cultural lens, however, reveals that television codes and conventions from the West were integrated in this communist production. The series' content is the result of a compromise between what Polish children, who were enthusiastically watching the imported American children's Western *Zorro*, expected and the degree of freedom television producers could negotiate within the constraints of the censored, state-controlled broadcasting system.

The insights this chapter offers into that negotiation mechanism are eye-opening. Not only do they depict television producer Konrad Nałęcki as a creative co-author of a narrative on Polish national ideology, they also show that adults in power, concerned about providing children with successful entertainment, gave the latter freedom of choice concerning the editing of a crucial border scene. As a result, communist children's television is both specific and universal, and both propaganda and genre are key concepts needed to analyse its meaning.

The depiction of borders at the Bug and Oder rivers in *Four Tank-Men*, which played a quintessential role in the legitimation of the Polish People's Republic, is clearly propagandistic. While the crossing of the imagined eternal Soviet-Polish border at the Bug symbolized the transformation from Polish captivity to Polish freedom, the fighting at the Oder warned viewers of the perennial threat of German revisionism,

from which Poland would only be protected through securing friendship with the Soviet Union. Another specificity of *Four Tank-Men* lies in the irony, inconsistency and internal contradictions of the plot that corresponded to the way Polish society was organized, insofar as Polish borders needed to be kept in place, and national identity celebrated under the acceptance of Soviet hegemony. The joke that tank-man Grigorij had a darker skin because his Polish father was a chimney sweeper, which serves to gloss over his Georgian background once he finds himself on Polish soil, showcases the volatility of historical meanings.

However, since they consumed the series as an entertaining adventure, young viewers considered its historical content largely irrelevant, in the same way that an American child would enjoy the narrative plot of a Western. The universality of this communist children's television series lay in the fact that the historical content functions only as a backdrop against which the heroes can present themselves as a cowboy gang undertaking subversive activities during their journey to the West. To that end, television producer Konrad Nałęcki borrowed enthusiastically and intensively from different genre codes and conventions: the road movie, the comedy, the war movie and, above all, the Western. While the depiction of the crossing of the Bug River was based on a gross historical falsehood, the Oder River scenes employ the tropes of a Western battle: good guys versus bad guys. These adaptations grant the series its universal appeal. Packaging ideology at the margins of, or beyond, conscious awareness was nonetheless meaningful, as the representation of borders reminded Polish children of their place in the world. To an extent, enjoying the series meant endorsing its ideological content and accepting its stance on the nation's territory.

Is adventure for children the best type of propaganda, as right-wing conservative television critic Krzysztof Kłopotowski remarked of *Four Tank-Men* in 2008? Now grown-up and resentful or ashamed to have been 'deceived',¹⁰³ some ex-devotees criticize *Four Tank-Men* for its inaccuracies. What they forget is the extent to which children, just like their parents, were willing to accept political ambiguities in exchange for entertainment. Its subversive merit lay in the fact that the series transformed a dominant narrative of the past based on forgery into a charming communist fairy tale in which children wanted to believe. In the end, children under communism were already consumers of mass media content and, therefore, also ought to be studied as such.

Notes

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- 78 *Cztery pancerni i pies*, episode 13, dir. Konrad Nałęcki. 13:40–27:30.
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