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A Good Man Among Bad Americans: The Image of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in *Przekrój* (1960-1964)

Przekrój was one of the most popular culture magazines published in Communist Poland. It was addressed to intellectual elites. For many years it saved much of its independence and neutral character. The paper presents the image JFK in the magazine that generally did not deal with politics and avoided the communist propaganda. Content analysis of the weekly's issues from the period of 1960 - 1964 show several discourses in which JFK was presented to *Przekrój* readers.

Key words: John F. Kennedy, *Przekrój*, communist propaganda, image

This text was originally meant to be devoted to the image of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and his presidency in women's press during the communist period in Poland. I assumed that, as the press was addressed to women, it probably rarely referred to political issues, and would be full of articles about Kennedy's marriage, rumors about his wife, and a commentary on her fashion style – all of which would be presented without ideological bias. However, my assumptions turned out to be erroneous. Firstly because the women's press of this period did not deal with gossip – no celebrity betrayals, divorces or children out of wedlock. It's hard to imagine today, but throughout a period of five years, issues of two of the most popular women's magazines, *Przyjaciółka* and *Kobieta i Życie*, there were only three texts related to the Kennedys – both *Przyjaciółka* and *Kobieta i Życie* published a posthumous memo after the assassination of JFK in a somber tone, underlining the loss of a good man and a distinguished politician. Additionally, *Kobieta i Życie* published a longer article entitled "Jackie Kennedy," devoted to Jacqueline Kennedy's childhood, education, marriage and widowhood. Research material from the two most popular Polish women's magazines does not provide enough information to become a subject of analysis. It does, however, suggest a certain aura around the figure of JFK which existed in a space which was not free from the regime's interests or censorship, but

which, on the other hand, was not commonly associated with propaganda, including media directly responsible for creating or affecting political opinion. This research failure directed my attention to a different kind of magazine, not bound to the centers of communist power and its propaganda.

Przekrój was¹ a very unique weekly, founded in Krakow in April 1945, before World War II had officially ended. Kraków survived WWII in a better condition than any other Polish city and incomparably better than Warsaw, and, what was most important, the only color printing press was preserved there. Justyna Jaworska, a Warsaw-based researcher and author of a book about *Przekrój* entitled *Civilization of Przekrój: The Mission of Manners in the Illustrated Magazine*, claims that *Przekrój* "was edited in Krakow, focused on Warsaw, staring at Paris" (63). It created something of a non-normative civilization of intelligentsia in a Polish post-war society.

Przekrój had a regular circulation of 250,000 to 450,000 copies (Jaworska 275), and each copy had many readers. The founding father of *Przekrój* was Marian Eile, and he ran it until 1969 as editor-in-chief, gathering a team of great literary talents: Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, a very talented and popular Polish poet and satirist; Sławomir Mrożek, a dramatist and cartoonist; Melchior Wańkowicz, a writer and journalist who from 1949 to 1958 lived in the U.S. and regularly contributed articles about the U.S., Canada and Mexico to *Przekrój*; Czesław Miłosz, the late Nobel laureate, and many more. Over the years, *Przekrój* reflected and shaped the transformation of the Polish post-war society, but did so through the prism of an illustrated satirical literary magazine. As a magazine with a mission, it published high-quality literature, both foreign and domestic, influential film and theater reviews, and articles about exhibitions, art trends, fashion, food and good manners. The formula of *Przekrój* resembled the formula of *The New Yorker* – a local literary satirical magazine addressed to intellectual elites. Like *The New Yorker*, *Przekrój* was not afraid to experiment with the form and content of published material, and promoted intellectual challenges. Marian Eile was very much like Harold Ross, the legendary founder of *The New Yorker*. Like Harold Ross, he also was something between a genius and a freak, very intelligent and totally devoted to his work. Also like Ross, he served as editor-in-chief for 25 years.

The main idea of the magazine was to create a space different from dull reality, far from politics, and free of propaganda and the discourses dominating other media. On the one hand, *Przekrój* alluded to the culture of the interwar period with a clear social division between the elite and the rest of the masses, fostering good manners and erudition, while on the other it strove to build ties with and within the new post-war intelligentsia which had no, or very poor, cultural capital. Readers were taught how to sit at a table, how to eat fish and what to read. Regular sections with words and expressions of foreign origin helped people to enrich their vocabulary. With high-class literature, wit, good manners, regular sections with film, theater and art reviews, *Przekrój* maintained the tradition of a bourgeois salon. Interesting texts provided by foreign correspondents from Paris, Rome and New York cut little holes in the Iron Curtain and created an impression that Poles kept pace with the world. *Przekrój* was an unusual phenomenon not only in Poland but in the entire

¹ The last issue of *Przekrój* was released in September 2013 after almost 70 years on the market.

Soviet bloc. It was read not only in Poland; there were many cases noted of people who had learnt Polish only to be able to read *Przekrój*, the most famous case of which is Joseph Brodsky.

The aim of the paper is to reconstruct the image of John F. Kennedy in Communist Poland at the time of his presidency – the image of the American president that was the most credible and convincing to the Polish audience, and thus not dominated by political propaganda. *Przekrój* was not totally free of communist propaganda, but there was very little political content in it – just enough to be able to publish more interesting articles without the risk of gaining the disapproval of the authorities. *Przekrój* was very popular, with a wide circulation and a very high reader-per-copy rate, thus it could be assumed that the image of JFK popularized by *Przekrój* was accepted by many Poles at that time.

The research was based on content analysis “a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti 608). The research material was collected from 5 years of *Przekrój* issues – dating from the beginning of Kennedy’s presidency to one year after his death. The year 1964 is also perceived by Polish press researchers as the year in which the social importance of *Przekrój* started to decline, and its social function as a national culture salon was taken over by TV (Jaworska 18). All together, 260 issues of *Przekrój* – from issue no. 769 to no. 1029 – were studied, and as a result 27 texts on Kennedy were found. Most of these texts were printed on the second page in a section called “*Przekrój tygodnia*” (“Cross-section of the Week”), the only page of the magazine devoted entirely to politics, which, according to Justyna Jaworska, Eile made sacrifices in for the sake of political peace (268). It was a peculiar, unwritten arrangement with the authorities: “I give you space for the content you wish, but all other pages of the magazine shall be filled with texts free of politics.” The notes on Kennedy appeared with varying intensity depending on what was happening on the political scene. There were texts on Kennedy in the fall of 1962 because of the Cuban crisis, and in the winter of 1963/64 after Kennedy’s assassination. In these sections, 19 short texts with Kennedy’s name appeared, and the remaining eight were longer editorials describing various aspects of Kennedy’s activities: Zygmunt Broniarek wrote about the idea and importance of Kennedy’s press conferences, and Lucjan Kydryński described his visit to the White House and a short meeting with Kennedy. Longer texts appeared after Kennedy’s death: in 3 consecutive issues starting in March 1964, Thomas Buchanan’s text entitled “Enigma of Dallas Crime” (in Polish: “Zagadki zbrodni w Dallas”) was published.²

An analysis of the collected material allowed certain perspectives that were consistently applied when Kennedy was presented to be distinguished. When international affairs between the U.S. and the Soviet Union were discussed, binary oppositions were built in order to construct certain meanings that would serve propaganda purposes. The Soviet Union was presented as the total opposition to the United States. No matter whether it was the Cuban Missile Crisis or the second Berlin Conflict, the Soviet Union was always presented as a progressive, friendly peace-seeker while the United States was described as an aggressive, hostile country

² Thomas Buchanan, “Zagadki zbrodni w Dallas.” *Przekrój* 988, March 1964: 5-7 (Part 1) and *Przekrój* 989/990, April-May 1964: 6-7 (Part 2).

ruled by conservative, sinister forces. The same strategy was applied when the leaders of both countries were presented: Andriej Gromyko, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Nikita Khrushchev, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, were also presented as progressive, friendly peacemakers. We should expect that, according to this simple rule of oppositions, Kennedy, as an American leader, would be introduced as an aggressive and hostile leader. However, *Przekrój* fed its readers with different narratives.

Firstly, Kennedy was never equated with the United States. In all of the texts in which Kennedy appeared, he was introduced as an opposition or even contradiction to America and truly American values, which for *Przekrój* meant: conservative, Republican, communist-haters, who were greedy, cared only about their own interests and therefore provoked all kinds of conflicts all over the world. Secondly, Kennedy was never openly criticized, even in times of escalating political conflict such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. The authors of the articles always blamed American forces of evil, associated with the hated Republicans, but not the President. Thirdly, the bipolar division of the world had lost its clarity, because Kennedy, even though he was the leader of the hostile country, was frequently presented as a so-called "our boy," who does what he can to live with the Soviet Union in peace and friendship and has to overcome enemies in his own country.

The collected research material allowed for the identification of several recurring contexts, signs and themes which, as a result, created a basis for developing a discourse analysis, which is very useful for studying both cultural and political meanings.

Discourse after Michel Foucault is understood in this chapter as "an entity of sequences of signs in that they are enouncements" (Foucault 141). An enouncement was understood by Foucault as an abstract construct in which signs communicate specific and repeatable relations among different statements, objects or subjects (140). Discourses operate in three basic dimensions: use of language, communication of ideas, and, as a result, social interaction. John Fiske specifies: "A discourse is a socially produced way of talking and thinking about a topic. It is defined by reference to the area of social experience that it makes sense of, to the social location from which that sense is made and to the linguistic or signifying system by which that sense is both made and circulated" (226).

The analysis showed that in texts about JFK published in *Przekrój* during his presidency, several discourses were applied. The first important discourse appearing in texts on Kennedy is the **discourse of youth**. JFK is presented as a young, fresh, energetic and very promising leader of the hated empire. His young age and attractive appearance are contrasted with politicians of the previous Washington administration and Republican politicians. The note published in *Przekrój* on November 20, 1960, informs readers about the election of a new American President. In this article, Kennedy is presented as a politician who is expected to bring youth, freshness and long-expected changes to the rotten and musty White House. His young age is contrasted with the age of other Western leaders – de Gaulle and Adenauer – who are called 'grandpas' ("35 Prezydent").

The discourse is built around attributes such as youth, energy and open-mindedness, which make Kennedy similar to Soviet Union leaders, who are not young in age, but in spirit. They are progressive leaders of a progressive country, whereas

Kennedy, although young, energetic and progressive, is forced to rule a very conservative nation. Also, a private meeting of a popular journalist named Lucjan Kydryński with Kennedy in the White House, described in Kydryński's correspondence for *Przekrój* of October 1962, presents the President as a young and energetic person. The meeting was organized by Arthur Schlesinger, advisor to JFK, and Kydryński was invited to the White House together with an international group of Scots, Italians, Greeks, Germans and Pakistanis. In Kydryński's eyes Kennedy appears as a handsome, high-energy, open-minded man (Kydryński 9).

The next discourse used in the context of Kennedy's figure could be labelled as the **discourse of wisdom and sobriety**. Kennedy is portrayed as a realist who soberly and critically looks at his country, and above all at the political forces which are opposed both to him and to the Soviet Union. Even before Kennedy was elected, *Przekrój* informed readers on October 16, 1960, of the ongoing election campaign involving Nixon and Kennedy. As the magazine reports, the political programs of both candidates are very similar, but during the television debate taking place for the first time in history, Nixon accused Kennedy of being very critical about America, which is not right, especially when Khrushchev is in New York ("Kennedy - Nixon").

The above-mentioned note published on November 20, 1960, informing readers about the election of a new American President also states that Kennedy won the election because he was a realist, very critical of the decisions of the previous government representing the old, conservative America ("The 35th President").

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, on October 11, 1962, *Przekrój* published an extensive note in which President Kennedy was presented as a politician with very balanced views who attempted to alleviate the conflict while the Republican politicians tried at any price to exacerbate the conflict. Indeed, the discourse of wisdom and sobriety was particularly intense during the Caribbean Missile Crisis when Kennedy had to make political decisions against the Soviet political interest. In its issue of September 23, 1962, in a short article titled "Another Doctrine," *Przekrój* explains that, just as the U.S. has its Truman Doctrine, the Soviet Union was also ready to provide help to every peace-loving country. However, John F. Kennedy was not presented as a leader who wanted America to enter into war; on the contrary, he was the only one who, according to the authors of the text, confirmed the absence of Soviet bases and troops in Cuba, as well as the fact that the Soviet Union's aid to Cuba was limited only to supplies of equipment and expert support. At the same time, the President directed harsh words towards Cuba and those who provoked military intervention, on whose shoulders responsibility for the conflict rested - namely, the Republicans and the American mass media which supported them. However, in the situation of military provocation organized by reactionary Cuban immigrants (and their American supporters), Kennedy had no choice but to mobilize the military reserves. This way of creating a narration around Kennedy is quite a typical and significant component of the discourse of wisdom and sobriety, in which Kennedy's decisions were seen as reliable, even if they were not suitable for the interests of the Soviets. They assumed that Kennedy simply had no choice because of sinister forces among the American political elites that prevented him from taking reasonable actions which, though not much in favor of the Soviet Union, were for the good of all peace-loving people throughout the world.

The discourse of wisdom in more dramatic moments of American-Soviet relations turns into a **discourse of a lonely fight** in which Kennedy is presented as

a solitary fighter who has almost no allies in his own country who could possibly understand his views and decisions.

As a matter of fact the only support and understanding Kennedy receives is from the Soviet leaders, and the Soviet people who understand the difficult situation of the President feel truly sorry for him. This is clearly seen in a note published in *Przekrój* on April 30, 1961, informing readers about the invasion of Cuba known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion. Although President Kennedy was informed about the invasion after his election and gave his consent, the text unequivocally suggests that the invasion was not a result of an independent decision made by Kennedy, but resulted, rather, from the insidious activities of the CIA, whose aim was to mislead the President. Fortunately, Kennedy was aware of the CIA's intentions and considered the invasion a big mistake. *Przekrój* quotes an article from *The London Times* which expressed a very critical attitude towards the American action and advises Americans to surrender ("Atak na Kubę"). In the note, the wisdom and realistic attitude of the President towards his political opponents is also evidently seen, but what is particularly emphasized is the lonely fight of the President against his political enemies.

On September 30, 1962, just before the Cuban Missile Crisis began, *Przekrój* published information about the decision of the American Congress concerning a significant reduction of spending on aid to developing countries. According to *Przekrój*, the White House was irritated, and Kennedy commented on the decision in the following words: "It is an irresponsible action that makes no sense. I cannot believe it." ("Zamiast bomb") The President was irritated with the pettiness of the Congressmen, all of whom were conservative Republicans. The text also suggests that Kennedy wanted to gain sympathy for the United States in economically underdeveloped countries, which is why he stated in his speech that "you cannot separate the guns from schools and roads" ("Zamiast bomb"). Again Kennedy appears as a solitary fighter who has supporters nowhere else but in the Soviet Union.

JFK's attitude towards the USSR presented so far leads us to the next discourse used in articles on the American President in *Przekrój* – namely, **a discourse of friendship**, in which JFK is presented as a leader open to agreements with the Soviet leaders representing the USSR. Sometimes Kennedy is even portrayed as a friend of the Soviet Union, understanding and caring, such as when Kennedy met Khrushchev in Vienna and the June 11, 1961 edition of *Przekrój* ("Spotkanie wiedeńskie") described the two-day meeting as friendly and promising for future relations between the two countries, and underlined the friendly atmosphere of the meeting by illustrating it with a small black-and-white photograph of the two world leaders. It is also emphasized that further world peace required the cooperation of the two major powers, and the meeting in Vienna was the first step towards such cooperation.

The discourse of friendship is also built from words and phrases related to a presentation of Kennedy's warm attitude towards Poland and the Polish people, for instance. In a short biography of President Kennedy published after the assassination two of Kennedy's visits to Poland in 1939 and 1955 were recorded, during which the American President paid special attention to the exceptional values of Poles with whom "he built friendly relationships" ("O J.F. Kennedy"). *Przekrój* also published texts creating among its readers an impression that Poland is particularly near and dear to President Kennedy. On January the 8, 1961 *Przekrój* published a photo of the

President-elect with Marzena Malinowska, a Polish student from Krakow, former Miss Juwenalia who participated in a beauty contest in California. Miss Malinowska posed for the photo with Kennedy's book. ("Elekt i MM"). Also, in a short note from spring 1963 we can read information about President Kennedy hosting the Poznańskie Słowiki Polish boys choir ("Słowiki u prezydenta"). These small bits and pieces of texts and pictures constructed an impression that President Kennedy recognized and respected Poland and was a mighty friend of Polish people in Washington.

All of the above-discussed discourses cumulate and find their explanation in **the victim discourse** that dominates the articles on Kennedy after his assassination. On December 1, 1963, *Przekrój* dedicated an entire page to the news of the Kennedy assassination, which was presented as a despicable crime committed by America's dark, sinister forces opposed to world peace and cooperation with the Soviet Union – a big supporter of which was John Fitzgerald Kennedy. The authors argue that in the United States many people were happy about the death of the President and celebrated, while in Warsaw the news about the assassination resulted in the last-minute cancellation of Paul Anka's concert that was going to be held in the Congress Hall of the Palace of Culture and Science. *Przekrój* emphasized the grief and sadness of Polish people shocked by the Dallas tragedy and contrasted it with the joy of some American political circles after the President's death. Additionally, the magazine published condolence messages from Khrushchev in which he accused the sinister forces in the United States of degeneration and cruel crime. At the same time, Polish party leaders Aleksander Zawadzki and Jozef Cyrankiewicz expressed their grief after the loss of this great statesman who was open to dialogue and sought peace in the world. A short biography of President Kennedy emphasized his courage, good education and authorship of two books. Furthermore, the text also compares Kennedy to Abraham Lincoln, and presents these two American presidents as great reformers who fought and failed against American sinister forces. As in Lincoln's times, many fascists, racists and enemies of progress and peace also exist in contemporary America. Since his assassination, Kennedy has been described almost as a saint, and texts regarding his life and death use the poetics of hagiography with a moralizing and panegyrical character.

In the spring of 1964, *Przekrój* published a text by Thomas G. Buchanan which also, in its general assumptions, corresponds with the entire concept of presenting President Kennedy. Buchanan's text is one of the first conspiracy theories, many of which appeared later. Buchanan was an American journalist who worked for *The Washington Evening Star* and lost his job when it was discovered that he was a member of the American Communist Party. In 1961, he moved to France. After Kennedy's assassination he noticed inconsistencies in the stories reported in the media, and began to write an analysis of the alleged facts and speculations. Extracts of his analysis were published by *L'Express* as a series of 6 articles titled "Who Killed Kennedy?" and *Przekrój* published Polish translations of these articles. Both Buchanan's political sympathies and his speculations about Kennedy's death gained the sympathy of the Polish regime, which is why, just after Paris, Krakow was also able to follow the fascinating investigation. "Buchanan's thesis is that the assassination of President Kennedy was the product of a rightest plot in the United

States,”³ and it corresponded with the main line of Polish interpretation and appraisal of Kennedy as a victim of truly sinister political forces in the U.S.

The discourses consequently used by *Przekrój* in its portrayal of John F. Kennedy were not typical, but were still representative of the Communist Polish media and must have had some purpose. What was the hidden and not fully understandable aim of such a propaganda strategy? It is difficult to give a conclusive explanation. One of the reasons might have been the wishful thinking of the Kremlin administration, which, after Eisenhower’s presidency, which was very strict and critical towards the Soviet Union, hoped the next president coming from the opposite side of the American political scene would be a second Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had led American politics in a pro-Soviet direction. Shiraev and Zubok confirm the explanation: “During the years of Nikita Khrushchev (late 1950s – early 1960s), the Kremlin leadership and Soviet propaganda began to categorize their counterparts in Washington into two large groups. The first one was the ‘bad guys,’ who were typically located in the Pentagon, the CIA, and various right-wing conservative think-tanks. The second group was comprised of ‘sober minded elements,’ i.e., those who were ready to communicate and negotiate with the Soviets. The Kremlin’s old men never abandoned their dream to return to a modicum of the Great Alliance, where the United States would respect Soviet security interests and its equal place in the pantheon of world powers. Not surprisingly, the most popular political figures among the Soviet political elite were John F. Kennedy and ten years later, Richard M. Nixon, who spoke to Kremlin rulers in the language familiar to them of spheres of influence and geo-strategic balances” (12). John F. Kennedy, although polite, was at the same time very determined in his political decisions towards the Soviet Union. Although he abandoned Eisenhower’s policy of massive retaliation, so hated by the Soviet leaders, he resisted Soviet expansionism, especially in Latin America, by flexible response and by combining economic support with military assistance.

What was interesting, though, was the cultural dimension of Kennedy’s image created unconsciously by the communist media. It presented JFK as a young, energetic reformer who wanted to change the world while dark, sinister forces in America did not let him complete his work, as a victim of the system and dirty politics, and as a statesman who paid the ultimate price for his intransigence. This somewhat mythologized interpretation of Kennedy now has a global dimension, gained mainly due to the president’s tragic and untimely death. It is worth noting, however, that such a narrative had already been used by the Communist media since the time of the election campaign, and the Kennedy assassination was just a dramatic event that ended and justified this narrative. *Przekrój* was a very popular magazine and thus played a crucial role in shaping JFK’s image among the Polish intelligentsia at that time. It influenced the perception of the President in Polish culture, and even today the main discourses dominating the narratives built around John F. Kennedy are those that developed in the Communist press.

³ Memo sent by Richard Helms, Deputy Director of Plans US CIA, to CIA Director John McCone, quoted in: John Kelin, *Praise from a Future Generation: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy and the First Generation Critics of the Warren Report*. San Antonio: Wings Press, 2007: 173.

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