

Florian Peters

The Institute for Contemporary History (Munich-Berlin)

In search of “socialist Thatcherism”. Reforming the economy in late socialist Poland

Polish communists' approaches to economic reform were necessarily heterodox throughout the 1980s: Faced with the breakdown of the national economy and the unprecedented political challenge by the Solidarity movement in 1980-1981, they staged a Stalinist-style „war on speculation”. In order to rebuild private economic initiative during Martial Law, they invited western capitalists to open up Polonia enterprises, while at the same time denouncing workers' self-government as “cryptocapitalist”. After half-hearted attempts to reform the planned economy had failed around the middle of the decade, the communist government opened up for real market reforms and tried to build popular support for a transition that promised individual economic freedom not as a first step towards democracy – but as its substitute. The latter approach was considered “socialist Thatcherism” by Moscow analysts. This paper traces the evolution of Polish concepts of economic reform during the 1980s and situates them in the context of similar endeavours in other countries of the socialist bloc. Based on research in party and government archives as well as on contemporary debates in the official and samizdat press, it analyses how neoliberal belief in free markets trickled into the Polish reform discourse way before the 1989 shock therapy, and how this shifted the stalemate between the communist government and the opposition movement. Thus, the paper aims to understand the Polish “transformation before transformation” in the broader context of systemic change in the last quarter of the 20th century.