

ARTICLE

Antoni Słonimski's UNESCO: On the Uses of International Organizations in Cold War Poland

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“The world of today is torn asunder by a great dispute,” the Polish author Czesław Miłosz wrote in 1951. On one side lay the east, “under the domination of Moscow,” and on the other the west, encompassing the rest of the globe. “Trampled down by History—that elephant,” Poles found themselves sequestered in the east. Unless, like Miłosz, they had somehow “escaped” to the west, they were doomed to live “behind the iron curtain” in a “hermetically sealed . . . Eastern world.”¹ Thanks partly to Miłosz’s influence, this Cold War vision of a bifurcated world has thoroughly shaped scholarship on postwar Poland and the rest of eastern Europe. In recent years, however, it has been increasingly contested. Historians no longer speak of “parting” or “raising” the Iron Curtain but rather see this boundary as “nylon,” “airy,” and “porous.”² They have uncovered an array of east-west ties as well as linkages along a different axis, north to south.³ These works belie the old idea of a “hermetically sealed . . . Eastern world” and also restore agency to its inhabitants. No longer “trampled down by history,” Poles now appear as “global citizens” who could “be part of the larger world and transcend the Cold War divide.”⁴ And yet one key way of transcending this divide still remains largely overlooked. While scholars explore points of contact between blocs in a “world . . . torn asunder,” they have been less attentive to the institutions that bound that world together: international organizations.

Long marginal in histories of the Cold War, international organizations are now taking center stage. Recent works show how they informed development schemes, humanitarian

¹ Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York, 1955), vi–vii, xi, 135, 140, 213.

² Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York, 1997); Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park, 2003); György Péteri, ed., *Nylon Curtain: Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe* (Trondheim, 2006); Alexander Badenoch, Andreas Fickers and Christian Henrich-Franke, *Airy Curtains in the European Ether: Broadcasting and the Cold War* (Baden-Baden, 2013); Theodora Dragostinova, *The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene* (Ithaca, 2021), 7.

³ See Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton, 2020); Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (Montreal, 2020); Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham, 2019); Philip Muehlenbeck, *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968* (Basingstoke, 2016); Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, 2015); Young-Sun Hong, *Cold War Germany, the Third World, and the Global Humanitarian Regime* (Cambridge, Eng., 2015); David Engerman, “The Second World’s Third World,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 183–211.

⁴ Małgorzata Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland* (Oxford, 2022), 183, 1.

aid, human rights discourse, and other major features of the Cold War order.⁵ The socialist “Second World” is often secondary in this story but is no longer absent. Scholars have demonstrated that its residents took active part in international organizations, working to write world history, advise on agriculture, and design mass housing.⁶ For the most part, though, the emphasis has been on what these experts did abroad, above all in the postcolonial “Third World.” We know much less about how people living in the eastern bloc engaged with international organizations at home—even though, as Theodora Dragostinova has written, such engagement “became an inextricable part of the experience of late socialism.”⁷

In a recent book, Louis Porter has explored Soviet encounters with UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. To Soviet citizens, Porter concludes, UNESCO was “a means of participating in a wider world while preserving their loyalties to the Soviet project.” By reading the organization’s magazines or visiting its exhibitions, residents of the USSR could take part in an “international public sphere” without crossing international borders.⁸ The same was true in Cold War Poland, though the dynamics were subtly different. For a society that was reluctantly incorporated into the “Eastern world,” international organizations offered opportunities not just to maintain contact with the west but also to combat Cold War division. Working with them could be a way to fight the bifurcation Miłosz described—to stand up to the elephant of history. Those who refused to take the Iron Curtain as a fact of life made use of international organizations to circumvent the bloc’s restraints, to challenge Cold War boundaries, and to expand their world.

This essay offers a case study of one man’s sustained engagement with one international organization. Rising to fame as a newspaper columnist in interwar Poland, Antoni Słonimski (1895–1976) became one of the best known and most influential writers in the eastern bloc. “There are three powers in Poland: the state, the Church, and Antoni Słonimski,” Warsaw wits joked towards the end of his life.⁹ This prominence owed much to an unlikely source: UNESCO. Słonimski had worked for the organization between April 1946 and February 1947, while he was living in exile in London. Although this stint was relatively brief, it shaped the rest of the writer’s career by helping him maneuver through a Cold War world. UNESCO made it easier for Słonimski to move from west to east, promoting both physical and ideological transit between blocs at a time of rising tensions. In Stalinist Poland, Słonimski’s past allowed him to maintain connections with the west. The writer drew on his experience with UNESCO to become a commentator on foreign affairs, which insulated him from pressure at home while raising his profile abroad. Elected president of the Union of Polish Writers in 1956, Słonimski modeled the organization on UNESCO and used his old employer to build

⁵ This literature is too voluminous to list here. Foundational texts include Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley, 2002); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York, 2012); and Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia, 2013). A recent contribution is Sandrine Kott, *Organiser le monde: Une autre histoire de la guerre froide* (Paris, 2021).

⁶ See James Mark, Artemy Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung, eds., *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington, 2020); Ned Richardson-Little, *The Human Rights Dictatorship: Socialism, Global Solidarity, and Revolution in East Germany* (Cambridge, Eng., 2020); James Mark, Bogdan Jacob, Tobias Rupprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska, 1989: *A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, Eng., 2019); Bogdan Iacob, ed., *State Socialist Experts in Transnational Perspective: East European Circulation of Knowledge during the Cold War (1950s–1980s)*, special issue of *East Central Europe* 45, no. 2–3 (2018); Patryk Babiracki and Austin Jersild, eds., *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War: Exploring the Second World* (London, 2016); Ilya Gaiduk, *Divided Together: The United States and the Soviet Union in the United Nations, 1945–1965* (Stanford, 2013).

⁷ Dragostinova, *The Cold War from the Margins*, 11. By 1980 Poland’s Ministry of Culture and Art cooperated with some eighty international organizations, and other ministries kept similar lists. Archiwum Akt Nowych 2/1354/0/2.6.3/LVI-743.

⁸ Louis Porter, *Reds in Blue: UNESCO, World Governance, and the Soviet Internationalist Imagination* (Oxford, 2023), 14.

⁹ Cited in Claude Furet, “Les Français souhaitent que l’ordre regne à Varsovie. Un entretien avec Antoni Słonimski [sic],” *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* 54, no. 2516 (January 1976): 19.

bridges to the west. When he was forced to step down three years later, UNESCO contacts empowered him to criticize the communist regime and turned him into Poland's foremost dissident—a man renowned on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

In the existing scholarship on Słonimski, though, UNESCO is practically absent. It appears only as a way station in exile: a job the writer took after escaping Poland during World War II and before he was ready to return. From the perspective of national history, Słonimski's time abroad looks like a detour. Scholars explore his attitudes to fellow émigrés and his visions of home while brushing off UNESCO as a temporary employer.¹⁰ In studies of Słonimski's later life, UNESCO gets subsumed under the category of “the west.” The writer's political activism tends to be read in Cold War terms, as a defense of liberal democracy against totalitarianism.¹¹ Through this lens, contact with UNESCO simply confirms Słonimski's western leanings and is of little interest in its own right. The influence of national and Cold War frameworks is so great that international organizations like UNESCO easily disappear from view. As in Słonimski's case, they are often dismissed as insignificant and written out of the story.

Yet international organizations were a major feature of the Cold War landscape. By the time of Słonimski's death in 1976, UNESCO had a budget of more than a quarter billion dollars and a staff of several thousand.¹² It was a global brand, known throughout the world for its exchange initiatives, development funding, and the World Heritage List.¹³ Słonimski's story reveals how Poles could make use of such organizations to navigate the Cold War order and challenge its limitations. An avowed internationalist, Słonimski dreamed of a world in which “the border greets you only with a signpost,” yet found this vision stymied by nationalism, fascism, and superpower competition.¹⁴ UNESCO was his means of fighting back. Its status and resources allowed the writer to travel between east and west, to skirt both blocs' restraints, and to push for greater openness between them. This essay recenters UNESCO in Słonimski's life story, showing how the organization helped him build an international career behind the Iron Curtain. It illustrates some of the many uses of international organizations during the Cold War, by those seeking to cross communism's boundaries and contest its limits.

The Road from West to East

On April 23, 1946, Antoni Słonimski assumed his new post as Counsellor of Letters for the Preparatory Commission of UNESCO. Founded in London five months prior as a specialized agency of the United Nations, UNESCO aimed to “contribute to peace and security by

¹⁰ Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism* (New Haven, 2006), 208–11; Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Słonimski. Heretyk na ambonie* (Warsaw, 2012), 235–72; Monika Ładoń, “Bardzo proszę pamiętać, że ja byłem przeciw”: *Studia o Antonim Słonimskim* (Katowice, 2008), 17–37; Tadeusz Makles, *Wobec ojczyzn: O ojczyznach ziemskich i idealnych we twórczości Juliana Tuwima i Antoniego Słonimskiego* (Katowice, 1987).

¹¹ This view took root during the Cold War, as illustrated by a 1978 review of Poland's first underground cultural journal, *Zapis*. Słonimski “is a symbol of Polish liberalism and dedication to democratic ideals,” Magnus Jan Kryński wrote. “His entire life as a writer and public figure was devoted to the struggle for freedom of expression and human rights. . . . Had Słonimski lived beyond the year 1976, he would, no doubt, have approved the Carter Administration's consistent defense of human rights.” Jan Kryński, “Poland 1977: The Emergence of Uncensored Literature,” *The Polish Review* 23, no. 2 (1978): 64–75, here 71–72.

¹² UNESCO's budgets are approved for two-year terms. UNESCO, “Approved Programme and Budget for 1975–1976,” at unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000012797 (accessed June 4, 2024). In 1975, UNESCO had a staff of 3,457. UNESCO, “UNESCO 1945–1995: A Fact Sheet,” at unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000101118 (accessed June 4, 2024).

¹³ On UNESCO as a brand, see Lynn Meskell, *A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace* (Oxford, 2018).

¹⁴ Antoni Słonimski, “O Polsce słabej” [1941], in Słonimski, ed., *Literatura na emigracji: Antologia “Nowej Polski”* (Łódź, 1946), 31.

promoting collaboration among the nations.”¹⁵ Its Preparatory Commission was tasked with translating this broad goal into a practicable program, to be presented at UNESCO’s first General Conference in November. Słonimski headed one of the Commission’s seven sections, responsible for literature and theater. “I had a ten-room office and two secretaries,” he recalled. “It was a nightmare. Very well paid and fairly honorable, but a nightmare. I had to get up at 8am.”¹⁶

By then, the fifty-year-old Słonimski was one of Poland’s best-known writers. He rose to fame in the 1920s as a convention-breaking poet, then penned a weekly column through the 1930s for Poland’s preeminent literary journal, *Wiadomości Literackie* (Literary News). Owing partly to his Jewish background, Słonimski was repulsed by the conservative, militant nationalism that pervaded the Polish Second Republic. His writings made the case for a different Poland: inclusive, open to the world, committed to social progress and individual freedom. While he considered himself both a liberal and a socialist, Słonimski’s preferred term was “Wellsist,” after the English author H. G. Wells. Visiting Wells in 1934, he wrote that he felt “a bit like Moses on mount Sinai, . . . permitted to speak to my god.”¹⁷ What drew Słonimski most was Wells’s vision of a world perfectible through science, in which reason would triumph over prejudice, injustice, and conflict.¹⁸ This vision became even more appealing during WWII, when Słonimski had to flee occupied Warsaw and ended up in London. He spent his time editing a journal called *Nowa Polska* (New Poland) and working on a Polish version of Wells’s “Declaration of the Rights of Man.”

It was Wells, in fact, who recommended Słonimski to UNESCO. The organization’s lavish founding conference, attended by nearly three hundred delegates from forty-four states, belied the clubbiness of its Preparatory Commission, which was made up primarily of English socialists. The head of the Commission, biologist Julian Huxley—grandson of Thomas and brother of Aldous—leaned on close friends, including biochemist Joseph Needham and poet Stephen Spender. Słonimski was chosen as a “representative of a smaller nation” who shared their political views.¹⁹ The Preparatory Commission “was steeped precisely in that Wellsism,” he later explained; “we had far-reaching dreams about a unified world, about world government, about the universal rights of man.”²⁰ The Commission’s Report, delivered in September, imagined UNESCO as a kind of global ministry of culture, committed to a “philosophy of human progress.” Its task was nothing less than to transform men’s minds. The Report called on UNESCO to make gramophone records, radio programs, and even feature films that would combat “man’s impulses of aggressiveness, combativeness, jealousy, anxiety” while “fostering co-operativeness, tolerance, kindness, [and] goodwill.”²¹

The “Report on the Programme of UNESCO” formed the basis of discussion at the organization’s first General Conference, held in Paris in November–December 1946. Fifty-eight states were represented, but it was the United States that played the leading role. Suspicious of UNESCO’s mushrooming ambitions, the US delegation rejected the Preparatory Commission’s Report as “a parade of hobby horses rather than a reasoned program.” Instead it advocated a much narrower agenda, which passed with the support of US allies amid widespread grumbling. Far from a ministry of culture, UNESCO was to function as

¹⁵ UNESCO, *Constitution*, Article I, at www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/constitution (accessed June 4, 2024).

¹⁶ Słonimski, “Moja praca w UNESCO,” in *Jedna strona medalu* (Warsaw, 1971), 551.

¹⁷ Słonimski, *Kroniki tygodniowe 1932–1935* (Warsaw, 2001), 232.

¹⁸ On Wells’s politics, see John Partington, “H. G. Wells and the World State: A Liberal Cosmopolitan in a Totalitarian Age,” *International Relations* 17, no. 2 (June 2003): 233–46.

¹⁹ Słonimski, *Alfabet wspomnień* (Warsaw, 1989), 75.

²⁰ *Radio France Internationale*, “Paryskie pobyty Słonimskiego,” at www.polskieradio.pl/68/2461/Audio/286234,Paryskie-pobyty-Slonimskiego (accessed June 4, 2024). For more on Huxley’s early visions for UNESCO, see Glenda Sluga, “UNESCO and the (One) World of Julian Huxley,” *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (September 2010): 393–418.

²¹ Preparatory Commission of UNESCO, “Report on the Programme of UNESCO” (London, 1946).

a “clearing house,” simply providing information to member states.²² Gone was all talk of fostering kindness or producing movies.²³ This was a particular blow to Słonimski, whose section of the Report—written in rather awkward English prose—had called for a robust publishing program, including a *World Literary Anthology* meant to promote the literature of “smaller countries.”²⁴ When the General Conference slashed the Report’s proposed budget, Słonimski’s plans were dead on arrival.

The writer took the setback badly. Although the General Conference appointed him to a new term heading the Section of Letters, Słonimski submitted his resignation just a few weeks later. He had no appetite for an administrative job, but also felt that US pressure had stymied his visions. “That first period was the most interesting, full of hopes, a period of planning activities for the future,” Słonimski told a friend. “Then came bureaucratization, political interventions, the doctrine of appeasement.”²⁵ Many of his colleagues felt the same way. Spender complained in early 1947 that UNESCO’s direction was “very depressing.”²⁶ Needham was forced to resign the next year, under suspicion of being a communist sympathizer.²⁷ Huxley—chosen as director-general in Paris—did not stand for reelection when his two-year term was up, once the US made clear that it would not support him.²⁸ As early as the First General Conference, it became plain that UNESCO would never fulfill Wells’s visions. And so Słonimski turned towards communist Poland, telling friends that he was planning a move back to Warsaw.²⁹

The writer had visited Poland in September 1945 and wrote in his memoirs that “this trip was a like harpoon that stuck in my heart.”³⁰ Still, he decided to remain in London, largely because of his distrust for the Soviet-backed Polish regime. Despite his commitment to socialism, Słonimski had no illusions about the USSR. He traveled there in 1932 and found the situation “worse than I could have imagined,” beset by poverty and fear.³¹ But time in England, around Wells’s circle, began to soften Słonimski’s attitude towards communist rule. Already in 1942, on the pages of *New Poland*, the writer allowed that “it may be necessary to limit freedom” in the interests of social welfare.³² Two years later, he argued that the Soviets had “the right to demand reforms in Europe that aim at collective and social security.”³³ Słonimski’s shift was partly a response to WWII, but also showed “the influence of English friends,” as he admitted.³⁴ “The English left was so infected with a tendency to minimize, they didn’t believe in camps, they said it was all exaggerated,” the writer remembered many years later. “There was a snobbery on the left. And this snobbery infected me too.” Working

²² United States Delegation, *First Session of the General Conference of UNESCO* (Washington DC, 1947).

²³ That is not to say that utopian thinking disappeared from UNESCO entirely. See Vincenzo Pavone, *From the Labyrinth of the World to the Paradise of the Heart: Science and Humanism in UNESCO’s Approach to Globalization* (Lanham, 2008).

²⁴ Preparatory Commission of UNESCO, “Report,” 140.

²⁵ Jakub Karpiński, “Obecność. Rozmowa z Antonim Słonimskim,” in Paweł Kądziałski and Artur Międzyrżeczki, eds., *Wspomnienia o Antonim Słonimskim* (Warsaw, 1996), 79.

²⁶ John Sutherland, *Stephen Spender: The Authorized Biography* (London, 2004), 327.

²⁷ Chloé Maurel, *Histoire de l’UNESCO. Les trente premières années. 1945–1974* (Paris, 2010), 115.

²⁸ Jan Opocensky, “The Second Year of Unesco’s Existence: The Third General Conference, Beirut, 1948,” in *The Beginnings of UNESCO, 1942–1948* vol. 1 (unpublished, 1950) at unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000085521 (accessed June 4, 2024).

²⁹ Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Słonimski*, 284.

³⁰ Słonimski, *Alfabet*, 191.

³¹ Quoted in Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Słonimski*, 128. For more on Słonimski’s trip, see Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, 112–14; and Grzegorz Moroz, “Fellow Travellers and Soviet Russia’s Guides in 1930s Travel Books by Antoni Słonimski, Robert Byron and Walter Citrine,” *Studies in Travel Writing* 24, no. 1 (2020): 88–101.

³² “Deklaracja Praw Człowieka,” *Nowa Polska* 1, no. 2 (May 1942): 162.

³³ [Słonimski], “W chwili rozstrzygnięcia,” *Nowa Polska* 3, no. 8 (August 1944): 485.

³⁴ Karpiński, “Obecność,” 80.

with the USSR came to seem manageable, even necessary, “thanks more to English friends than to Polish communists.”³⁵

At the same time, engagement in UNESCO helped to make Polish communists relatable. “We want to reeducate the world, or more precisely, to transform human nature,” Słonimski told a journalist ahead of the First General Conference. Amid the ruins of war, UNESCO would strive to build “a new civilization,” grounded in science and focused on “the masses.” First published in French, this interview quickly appeared in a Polish newspaper, alongside articles about “new forms of higher education” and “model housing for workers.”³⁶ It fit right in with the agenda of a “gentle revolution” formulated by the communist activist Jerzy Borejsza. Poland needed “great social and political reforms,” Borejsza argued, but these could “take a gentle form” so long as intellectuals led the way.³⁷ He, too, worked with UNESCO, participating in international meetings on expanding access to culture.³⁸ “Those were the communists I met,” Słonimski remembered, “and I was not afraid of them.”³⁹

In June 1947, shortly after resigning from UNESCO, the writer made a second trip to Poland, weighing the possibility of a permanent return. Słonimski clearly relished the UNESCO label, which established him as a figure of international significance. In several interviews, he still identified himself as head of UNESCO’s literary section; in others, he claimed that he had moved to an advisory role. Throughout, though, Słonimski described his old employer in the language of contemporary Polish politics. Speaking to the editors of a communist literary magazine, he said UNESCO had been “in contact with the Fabian Society to recommend books for trade unions, worker clubs [*światlice*], and reading rooms.” As a “pacifist institution,” he went on, it “constantly reaffirmed the need to collaborate with Soviet Russia.” When asked whether all member states were equally committed to working with the USSR, the writer painted an alternate reality: “if you mean the American bloc, it was defeated at the [Paris] congress by certain individuals. They included the Slavic bloc, France, England, a few countries from Latin America, and that was that.”⁴⁰ UNESCO, in this telling, was firmly part of the anti-imperialist camp, as recently articulated in Andrei Zhdanov’s “two camps doctrine.”⁴¹ Słonimski, too, seemed to be placing himself in that camp, drawing on his experience with UNESCO to present himself as a communist sympathizer.

At UNESCO’s next General Conference, held in Mexico City that December, Słonimski appeared as a delegate of the Polish regime. As the *UNESCO Courier* summed up, he “sharply attacked certain sections of the press, radio and cinema in the United States,” which he accused of perpetrating “cultural imperialism” by stifling European cultures.⁴² Słonimski came to speak the language of the Polish state, and not only in public. The writer remained bitter at the US for thwarting the Preparatory Commission’s vision for UNESCO, and also smarted at the shuttering of *New Poland*, which had gone bankrupt at the end of 1946. “To every criticism of communism he replies with negative examples from the West,” Słonimski’s good friend Karol Estreicher, Jr. vented in his diary. “‘Censorship in Poland’? But the West’s no better: he who has money can publish—and only he can publish who adopts the political line of governments in America and England.” Słonimski’s own experiences in the west

³⁵ Witold Mieczysławski, “Słonimski o sobie. Rozmowa z przyjacielem,” in Kądzelski and Międzyrżecki, eds., *Wspomnienia*, 209.

³⁶ [“Kar. B.”], “Praca nad stworzeniem nowego człowieka: Rozmowa z Antonim Słonimskim,” *Robotnik* 52, no. 335 (December 1946): 8.

³⁷ Jerzy Borejsza, “Rewolucja łagodna,” *Odrodzenie* 10/12 (January 1945), 1.

³⁸ See *Introduction to UNESCO* (Paris, 1947).

³⁹ Mieczysławski, “Słonimski o sobie,” 209.

⁴⁰ Słonimski, “Literatura w UNESCO,” *Kuźnica* 3, no. 28 (July 1947): 8–9.

⁴¹ On the “two camps doctrine,” see Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin’s Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953* (New Haven, 2006), 317–20.

⁴² “‘Free Flow of Ideas’ Debated: Delegates Express Views at Working Party Meetings on Mass Communications,” *The UNESCO Courier* 1, no. 1 (February 1948): 3.

largely confirmed the communists' critiques of it and helped to push him to their camp. "He decidedly wants to stand on the side of communism rather than of the Anglo-American world," Estreicher summed up.⁴³

Soon after his return from Mexico City, Słonimski started working for the Polish government as head of the Institute of Polish Culture in London. The job involved attending openings of Polish folk art exhibitions and interviewing George Bernard Shaw about his love for Stalin; it also entailed breaking with the Polish émigré community and publicly supporting communist rule. While he continued living in London, what Słonimski called "My Journey from W[est] to E[ast]" was already complete.⁴⁴ Biographers have seen this journey as a consequence of homesickness, but the writer himself cited UNESCO.⁴⁵ Work with the Preparatory Commission had propelled him further to the left; surrounded by socialists and fellow travelers, Słonimski grew open to working with the USSR. When US pressure scuttled the Commission's proposals, he lost faith that they could ever be enacted in the west. Instead, he turned towards the east, telling himself that Polish communists shared his utopian visions. "I remain faithful to the idea of fighting for peace and against fascism," Słonimski wrote in a Polish newspaper, "but I understood that this battle only makes sense if one stands . . . on our side of the barricade."⁴⁶

UNESCO helped Słonimski cross this barricade, providing a pathway between west and east. That was precisely what it was designed to do. Having grown out of wartime partnerships, UNESCO and the other UN agencies relied on shared goals, values, and assumptions that mitigated Cold War disagreements.⁴⁷ UNESCO was a US-dominated institution almost from the start, yet it pursued utopian goals through central planning. Its stated aim was to transform "the minds of men," building a new civilization on the ruins of "the great and terrible war."⁴⁸ Like eastern Europe's National Front governments, UNESCO was committed to an antifascism that privileged leftist voices. It, too, saw fascism as a deep, systemic taint that required thoroughly remaking the world order. To be sure, many within UNESCO were suspicious of the eastern bloc, and many in the bloc were equally suspicious of UNESCO. For Słonimski, though, the international organization was a bridge that fostered and facilitated cross-bloc contact. Such contact served to normalize communist rule, convincing the writer that he had nothing to fear from Polish authorities. It also raised his public profile, securing Słonimski a lucrative position at the Institute of Polish Culture. The writer's journey from west to east ran squarely through UNESCO; the bigger challenge would be getting back.

Contact Despite All Difference

For Polish officials, Słonimski's contacts in UNESCO were a major asset. They saw UNESCO as a fruitful ground for winning international support and even spurring leftist intellectuals to undertake their own journeys east. At the organization's Second General Conference in December 1947, the Polish delegation introduced a resolution whose target was clear, if unstated: "The representatives of science and culture assembled in Mexico City appeal to their colleagues, educators, scholars, artists, writers and journalists in the whole world, to oppose the war-mongers and defend peace with all the means and all the

⁴³ Karol Estreicher, *Dziennik wypadków. Tom II* (Kraków, 2002), 231.

⁴⁴ Słonimski, "Moja trasa Z-W," *Odrodzenie* 6, no. 3 (January 1950): 1.

⁴⁵ See Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Słonimski*, 272–99; Ładoń "Bardzo proszę," 17–37; Piotr Śliwiński, "Polish Twentieth-Century Poetry," in Tamara Trojanowska, Joanna Niżyńska, Przemysław Czapliński and Agnieszka Polakowska, eds., *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918* (Toronto, 2018), 436–37.

⁴⁶ Słonimski, "Moja trasa Z-W," 1.

⁴⁷ Kott, *Organiser le monde*, especially chapter 3; Gaiduk, *Divided Together*; Dan Plesch and Thomas Weiss, eds., *Wartime Origins and the Future United Nations* (London, 2015).

⁴⁸ UNESCO, *Constitution*, preamble.

power at their disposal.”⁴⁹ The US managed to defeat the resolution and even ban discussion of this issue in the future. But the setback only spurred Polish delegates to action. If they could not capture UNESCO from within, they would try to outflank it by staging an alternative cultural congress. With his UNESCO ties, Słonimski was ideally placed to play a leading role.

Planning for a World Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace began in early 1948. While Moscow lurked behind the scenes, the Congress was a Franco-Polish initiative, coordinated by Borejsza and the French physicist Frédéric Joliot-Curie, himself an active figure in UNESCO.⁵⁰ Słonimski served on its Executive Committee and was tasked with recruiting British delegates. He leaned on his UNESCO past, inviting Huxley, Needham, and several other members of the Preparatory Commission. When the Congress opened in Wrocław that August, Huxley was chosen as one of its five chairmen. Though he insisted that he was only there in a private capacity, the program identified him as UNESCO’s director-general, as did newspaper reports in Poland and abroad.⁵¹ In a sumptuous congress hall decorated by Pablo Picasso, alongside luminaries like Aimé Césaire, Fernand Léger, Georg Lukács, and Il’ia Erenburg, Huxley felt right at home. According to the US State Department, which watched the proceedings with apprehension, he even “informally discussed [the] possibility of welding world intellectuals into a group which would be affiliated with UNESCO and UN.”⁵²

Almost immediately, though, the plan went off the rails. Under Zhdanov’s orders, the Soviet delegation pushed the “two camps doctrine,” dismissing “uncommitted” intellectuals as lackeys of imperialism. Huxley stormed off in a huff and quickly tried to disassociate himself from the “tendentious and unfortunate” gathering.⁵³ In scholarship on the Cold War, the Wrocław Congress often figures as a moment of rupture, when differences between east and west became too stark to overcome.⁵⁴ Yet 426 out of 437 delegates signed on to the congress’s resolution, which urged intellectuals to defend “the free cultural development of nations” against “a handful of self-interested men in America and Europe who have inherited Fascist ideas.”⁵⁵ As with Poland’s failed UNESCO resolution, the text’s real target was perfectly clear. Anti-Americanism was the glue that held the Wrocław Congress together, proving—in Słonimski’s words—“that despite all political and economic differences contact between East and West is possible.”⁵⁶

Such contact became much less frequent in the coming years. Polish delegates did not attend UNESCO’s Third General Conference, held in Beirut in November 1948, and then walked out of the Fourth to protest collaboration with West Germany. After skipping three more General Conferences, the Polish government sent a formal resignation letter in 1952, calling UNESCO “an obedient instrument of the ‘cold war’ launched by American imperialism.”⁵⁷ In this environment, Słonimski could no longer stay abroad. He returned to Warsaw in mid-1951 and found himself unable to leave the country. Most western intellectuals, meanwhile, stopped coming to the eastern bloc. When the Second World Congress of the Defenders of Peace opened in Warsaw in November 1950, there was no Picasso, Césaire, or Léger, but only

⁴⁹ UNESCO, *Records of the General Conference of UNESCO*, second session, vol. 1 (Paris, 1948), 100.

⁵⁰ Piotr Kosicki, *Catholics on the Barricades: Poland, France, and “Revolution,” 1939–1956* (New Haven, 2018), 178–88. Joliot-Curie was one of France’s representatives to UNESCO’s First General Conference in Paris.

⁵¹ Światowy Kongres Intelktualistów w Obronie Pokoju, *Spis Uczestników* (Wrocław, 1948).

⁵² *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1948* vol. 4 (Washington, 1974), 913–14.

⁵³ US National Commission for UNESCO, *National Commission News*, 2, no. 4 (October 1948): 4.

⁵⁴ Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, “Modernism between Peace and Freedom: Picasso and Others at the Congress of Intellectuals in Wrocław, 1948,” in David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds., *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970* (London, 2008), 33–41.

⁵⁵ English translation from J. D. Bernal, “Wrocław and After,” *The Modern Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1949): 27.

⁵⁶ Słonimski, “Rozmowy o kongresie,” *Odrodzenie* 5, no. 37 (September 1948): 2.

⁵⁷ Jerry Morris, “The Developing Image of the Soviet Union: A Case Study of Soviet Participation in Unesco, 1946 to 1967” (MA Thesis, Western Michigan University, 1967), 129.

hardened communists like Joliot-Curie. In the era of high Stalinism, east and west were separated like never before, and yet UNESCO still provided points of contact.

In Poland, the columns that Słonimski wrote for *Nowa Kultura* (New Culture), the organ of the Polish Writers' Union, often revolved around UNESCO.⁵⁸ One mocked the English writer J. B. Priestley, a delegate to the first two General Conferences. In 1951, Priestley contributed to an issue of *Collier's* that imagined a US invasion of the Soviet Union. "From what I know of Priestley, it was careerism . . . that drove him to take on this ugly job," Słonimski struck back. "He's catering to the American market and pandering to attitudes in England."⁵⁹ For another column, the writer drew on his "involvement in the international peace movement" to lampoon the hypocrisy of western politicians.⁶⁰ "I myself once believed the world could be transformed . . . by persuasion," Słonimski wrote in reference to his time at UNESCO. He told his readers to avoid the same mistake and recognize that communism was the only way forward.⁶¹

For Słonimski, writing about UNESCO was a deliberate choice. He saw it as the least objectionable way to follow the restrictive rules of Stalinist discourse: to stay politically correct yet true to his own politics. "Compromises were necessary," the writer later recalled, "but you always had to know how far you could bend, where the limit was."⁶² To avoid having to praise the building of socialism at home, as many of his friends found themselves doing, Słonimski turned his focus to the outside world.⁶³ The writer served on the Polish Committee of the Defenders of Peace as well as on the executive board of Polonia, the Society for Contact with the Emigration. He penned appeals that urged émigrés to return and western writers to resist remilitarization.⁶⁴ Once Poland rejoined UNESCO in 1954, Słonimski sat on the Polish Committee for UNESCO Affairs and on the board of the Polish PEN-Club—an organization for writers ("Poets, Essayists, Novelists") that came to be affiliated with UNESCO.⁶⁵ In the early 1950s, when Cold War tensions were as hot as ever, such outreach efforts rarely led to substantive engagement with the west. At home, however, they served a valuable function, keeping Słonimski in the regime's good graces without requiring him to transform his style.⁶⁶

One consequence was that Słonimski's rhetoric remained largely accessible to friends beyond the bloc. Like Huxley, many in UNESCO saw communist newspeak as "tendentious and unfortunate," but the anti-Americanism that Słonimski espoused in his columns was a different matter. Inside UNESCO, anger at US dominance ran deep. "Voluminous memoranda arrive unceasingly from the [US] state department," French foreign minister Georges Bidault complained in 1947. "Some member states are rightly asking whether the real director-general is in Washington, not in Paris."⁶⁷ Later that year, the US threatened to withhold its funding—nearly

⁵⁸ Founded in 1950, *New Culture* became independent of the Writers' Union in 1956 and continued publishing until 1963.

⁵⁹ Słonimski, "Fata Morgana pana Morgana," *Nowa Kultura* 2, no. 49 (December 1951): 1.

⁶⁰ Słonimski, "Erenburg laureatem Stalinowskiej Nagrody Pokoju," *Nowa Kultura* 4, no. 2 (January 1953): 1.

⁶¹ Słonimski, "Front Narodowy i Front Antynarodowy," *Nowa Kultura* 3, no. 43 (October 1952): 2.

⁶² Karpiński, "Obecność," 80.

⁶³ Słonimski was not able, or willing, to escape praising socialism entirely. See poems like "Portret prezydenta" or "Dziesięciolecie" in Słonimski, *Poezje* (Warsaw, 1955).

⁶⁴ "Apel do pisarzy całego świata," *Nowa Kultura* 5, no. 25 (June 1954): 1.

⁶⁵ On the early history of PEN, see R. A. Wilford, "The PEN Club, 1930–1950," *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 1 (January 1979): 99–116.

⁶⁶ One notable exception is Słonimski's stilted attack on Czesław Miłosz, written shortly after Miłosz's defection to the west and Słonimski's arrival in Warsaw. The open letter, published in the official newspaper of the Polish United Workers' Party, showed none of its author's characteristic wit and style: "You agitate against the planned work encompassing the ever broader Polish masses, you strike a blow against the building of factories, universities, and hospitals, you are an enemy of workers, peasants, and the intelligentsia . . ." Słonimski, "Odprawa," *Trybuna Ludu*, November 4, 1951, 6. English translation from Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, 291.

⁶⁷ Maurel, *Histoire de l'UNESCO*, 101.

half of UNESCO's budget—if the organization did not cut spending. Faced with a similar threat in 1952, Huxley's successor as director-general, the Mexican diplomat Jaime Torres Bodet, resigned in protest. He was replaced by the Texas-born Luther Evans, who started keeping lists of communists on the UNESCO staff. In his old job as the Librarian of Congress, Evans had embraced the Federal Employee Loyalty Program, proclaiming, “we don't want any communists or cocksuckers in this library.”⁶⁸ He did the same for US staffers at UNESCO, requiring them to appear in front of a Loyalty Board and firing several who refused.⁶⁹ UNESCO employees were ordered to maintain “impartiality” and “not engage in any political activity”—code for communist leanings.⁷⁰ Even in Paris, McCarthyism reigned.

UNESCO officials who chafed under US control increasingly looked towards the Soviet Union as a counterweight. Although it was a founding member of the UN, the Soviet Union initially refused to join UNESCO, using three east European satellites—Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary—as proxy for its views. Their representatives delivered fiery speeches blasting the United States, which accomplished little but often drew enthusiastic applause. “It was for me a melancholic spectacle,” Torres Bodet recalled of watching the Polish delegate Henryk Birecki. “He knew that his objections were condemned to fail . . . but many of them were not wrong.”⁷¹ After skipping three General Conferences, eastern bloc states returned in 1954 alongside the USSR. Following Stalin's death, new communist leaders reasoned that refusing to participate in the international system had put them at a disadvantage. “In leaving UNESCO, we left the battlefield,” a Polish diplomat summed up.⁷² US officials were aghast and pressured Evans to resist all Soviet initiatives. Most other countries, though, welcomed the USSR, hoping that its accession would reduce American dominance.⁷³

It was in this context that Słonimski sailed to Montevideo in November 1954 for UNESCO's Eighth General Conference. The conference did not go well for the USSR: under Evans's stewardship, the delegates rejected almost all Soviet proposals, notably one to admit the People's Republic of China. Before each vote, British, American, and West German representatives conferred to align their positions and voted as a bloc.⁷⁴ They did the same on Polish resolutions, including Słonimski's pet project: to “issue a publication to commemorate the centenary of the death of the great Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz, in 1855.” Evans sent the proposal to a subcommittee, which determined that a standalone book would be too expensive to print. Słonimski, however, pressed on, building on simmering resentments to make his case. Americans knew nothing about culture, he told a late-night meeting of the Budget Commission. “In an American literary encyclopedia, there is an entry for Mickey Mouse, but not for Mickiewicz.”⁷⁵ The Commission's American chairman jumped up to protest, but other speakers jumped on board. Brazil's representative enthusiastically backed Słonimski's resolution, although he later had to ask who Mickiewicz was. The French delegate added that a tribute to Mickiewicz “would be a tribute not only to a Pole, but also to a European and to one who had always fought for freedom.”⁷⁶ Fighting for freedom seemed to be front of mind for many delegates, and the proposal squeaked through over British, Australian, and Canadian objections. “The American voting machine broke down!” Słonimski crowed.⁷⁷

⁶⁸ Louise Robbins, “The Library of Congress and Federal Loyalty Programs, 1947–1956: No ‘Communists or Cocksuckers,’” *The Library Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (October 1994): 365–85.

⁶⁹ See Porter, *Reds in Blue*, 37–41.

⁷⁰ UNESCO, *Records of the General Conference of UNESCO*, eighth session, vol. 2 (Paris, 1955), 19.

⁷¹ Maurel, *Histoire de l'UNESCO*, 113.

⁷² Porter, *Reds in Blue*, 59.

⁷³ On political tensions within UNESCO, see T.V. Sathyamurthy, *The Politics of International Cooperation: Contrasting Conceptions of U.N.E.S.C.O.* (Geneva, 1964) and James Sewell, *UNESCO and World Politics* (Princeton, 1975).

⁷⁴ Maurel, *Histoire de l'UNESCO*, 132.

⁷⁵ Słonimski, “Karty z notatnika podróży po Urugwaju,” in Słonimski, *Artykuły pierwszej potrzeby: Notatki i uwagi, 1951–1958* (Warsaw, 1959), 53.

⁷⁶ UNESCO, *Records of the General Conference of UNESCO*, eighth session, vol. 1 (Paris, 1955), 445–46.

⁷⁷ Słonimski, “Karty,” 54.

The following summer, Słonimski's colleague Kazimierz Brandys came to Vienna for an international PEN-Club congress. For days the delegates condemned Americanization, groused about comic strips, and bemoaned the censoring effects of the free market. Brandys was blown away. "At first I thought I was dreaming: was I in Vienna or in Warsaw?"⁷⁸ Słonimski had felt similarly in Montevideo: despite a seven-year hiatus from UNESCO, he had no trouble making himself understood. The anti-American rhetoric the writer had honed in Stalinist Poland proved perfectly suited to a General Conference suffused with American power. Deprived of direct contact, Słonimski and his western friends continued to speak the same language, and international organizations were a major reason why. In Poland, Słonimski's past work with UNESCO allowed him to focus on international affairs instead of turning to obsequious praise. At a time when "compromises were necessary," the writer managed to preserve his acerbic style by turning it on the US—also the target of considerable criticism within UNESCO. "Even at moments of heightened international tension," Andrea Orzoff has argued, international organizations like the PEN-Club were crucial in "facilitating communication between warring camps."⁷⁹ UNESCO did the same, helping Słonimski to maneuver between blocs while blunting their ideological pressures.

Drawing on Experience

In December 1956, as Poland reckoned with a year of changes, Słonimski was elected president of the Union of Polish Writers (*Związek Literatów Polskich*, ZLP).⁸⁰ He had been active in the union for some time, heading its Warsaw branch between 1953 and 1955. As president, however, Słonimski had the power to remake the union from the top down, and he made clear that he would do just that. "The old union leadership was something like an honor guard or execution squad—depending on the situation," Słonimski told a journalist soon after his election. His union would be different, he insisted: "it won't teach, organize, instruct, expose, impose, berate, mobilize, activate, extol, chastise . . . you can add a few more similar verbs."⁸¹ As Polish leaders searched for a new road to socialism, Słonimski worked to build a ZLP that would be totally unlike its Stalinist predecessor. To do so, he drew extensively on the other cultural bureaucracy he knew well, UNESCO.

Returning to administrative work, the writer felt a sense of *déjà vu*. "It was a daily grind, going to the office," he wrote in his memoirs; "it was a heroic act on my part to get up for an appointment at 8 am."⁸² Founded in 1920 and then reconstituted after WWII, the ZLP was a large, fractious body with nearly 800 members. Initially it focused on material concerns like honoraria and copyright, but under Stalinism the union morphed into an arm of the regime. Its 1949 congress ordered writers "to consciously take part in building socialism . . . rethinking writing methods to better serve the broad masses."⁸³ Słonimski was an early critic of this policy, craftily couching his remarks in condemnations of the west. Precisely because western propagandists abused language, he argued in 1951, "we must return to words their freshness and power," avoiding writing that was "soulless" and "inhuman."⁸⁴ By 1956, Słonimski felt free to speak plainly and mocked socialist realism as "a precise tool for destroying art."⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Kazimierz Brandys, "PEN-Londyn, 1956," *Nowa Kultura* 7, no. 35 (August 1956): 1–2.

⁷⁹ Andrea Orzoff, "Eggs and Steam Hammers: The PEN International Club, Wolf Biermann, and the Limits of East German Literary Politics," *New German Critique* 45, no. 2 (August 2018): 174.

⁸⁰ On the significance of 1956 in Poland, see Paweł Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland, 1956*, trans. Maya Latynski (Washington, DC, 2009).

⁸¹ August Grodzicki, "'Czego zarząd nie będzie robił': Rozmowa z Antonim Słonimskim," *Życie Warszawy*, December 9–10, 1956, 3.

⁸² Słonimski, *Alfabet*, 245.

⁸³ Krzysztof Woźniakowski, *Między ubezwłasnowolnieniem a opozycją: Związek Literatów Polskich w latach 1949–1959* (Kraków, 1990), 34.

⁸⁴ Słonimski, "Przywróćmy słowom ich świeżość i siłę," *Nowa Kultura* 2, no. 45 (November 1951): 2.

⁸⁵ Słonimski, "O przywrócenie swobód obywatelskich," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 5, no. 14 (April 1956): 3.

Yet he held on to a vision of the ZLP as a “moral authority,” capable of doing what he had once hoped UNESCO would achieve: strengthening “the foundations of humanism and democracy” while restoring to the world its “color and truth.”⁸⁶

In his first speech as union president, Słonimski renounced all interference in writers’ work. His ZLP would have no ideology, he insisted, much less a binding “creative method.” It would not even hold discussions about literature: artistic questions were a private matter, more suited to cafés than union meetings. Communist writers—who still made up roughly one fifth of ZLP membership—were outraged at this retreat from politics, but so, too, were devout Catholics, nationalists, and other activists. For many members, the union’s refusal “to take any sort of position towards the unfolding social changes” represented a missed opportunity to participate in public affairs.⁸⁷ Słonimski, though, held firm, insisting that the ZLP remain completely neutral. “As union president . . . it’s hard for me to say what’s better and what’s worse,” he told the Soviet *Literaturnaia gazeta* (Literary Gazette). “I have to treat all writers equally, regardless of my own opinions.”⁸⁸ The ZLP was simply too diverse to take a stance. For Słonimski, any attempt to speak with one voice was bound to end in failure.

This was an insight born of experience. Having served on UNESCO’s Preparatory Commission, Słonimski knew firsthand how hard it was to build consensus out of differing worldviews. It took months of negotiation to write the Commission’s Report, which still fell flat when presented to the whole General Conference in Paris. By the time of the next General Conference in Mexico City, UNESCO leaders openly rejected the Report’s dream of “some unifying general outlook and philosophy” in favor of a “babelism of thought.”⁸⁹ Instead of arguing over principles, member states began to focus on practical matters, where compromise was easier to reach. Słonimski gradually came around to this view, recognizing that the Cold War made unanimity impossible. At a PEN-Club congress in London shortly before he became ZLP president, he gave a speech promoting peaceful coexistence and urging PEN to maintain political neutrality.⁹⁰ His ZLP would function the same way, more like an international organization than a centralized body. In his first act as president, in fact, Słonimski gave the union’s regional branches full autonomy, transforming them from subsidiaries into constituents.⁹¹

Słonimski’s agenda for the ZLP was lifted straight from the Preparatory Commission’s Report. Vowing to stay out of artists’ “creative process,” the Report stressed “the improvement of opportunities for professional training [and] the establishment of better working conditions.”⁹² Ten years later, Słonimski found himself in a position to achieve these goals. Instead of shaping literature, his ZLP focused on material issues, above all raising royalties. The union reworked its contract with Polish Radio to make sure writers were paid each time their work was used. This was long overdue, Słonimski explained: “I know from my experience with UNESCO that writers in the west depend in large part on collaboration with radio.”⁹³ Union members also faced a housing shortage, and here again the president’s thoughts turned to UNESCO. He spoke to the organization’s officials about funding a “house—or subdivision—for intellectuals in Warsaw,” an idea that predictably went nowhere.⁹⁴ To Słonimski, though, the long shot plan made perfect sense. His ZLP took inspiration from UNESCO; why should it not take money from UNESCO, too?

⁸⁶ Grodzicki, “Czego zarząd nie będzie robił.”

⁸⁷ Jan Kurczab, “Zjazd na zakręcie,” *Gazeta Krakowska*, December 13–14, 1958, 2.

⁸⁸ “Antoni Słonimski: Luchshe znat’ drug druga,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, September 23, 1958, 4.

⁸⁹ Preparatory Commission of UNESCO, “Report,” 6; Maurel, *L’Histoire de l’UNESCO*, 39.

⁹⁰ Brandys, “PEN-Londyn,” 2.

⁹¹ Woźniakowski, *Między ubezwłasnowolnieniem a opozycją*, 103.

⁹² Preparatory Commission of UNESCO, “Report,” 128.

⁹³ “Koniec armii zbawienia. Wypowiedź Antoniego Słonimskiego,” *Nowa Kultura* 8, no. 6 (February 1957): 1.

⁹⁴ “Antoni Słonimski—obok Steinbecka, Silone, Wilsona i Vercorsa—reprezentantem literatury Zachodu.” *Trybuna Robotnicza*, July 11, 1957, 3.

A second point of emphasis for Słonimski was contact between Polish writers and the outside world. To promote Polish literature abroad, Słonimski prepared a list of texts suitable for translation, noting that he had done “similar work in the literary section of UNESCO.”⁹⁵ He also planned an anthology of short stories from communist Poland, to be published by UNESCO—a callback to the *World Literary Anthology* he had proposed in 1946.⁹⁶ Polish writers, meanwhile, gained opportunities to travel to the west. Besides providing its own stipends, the ZLP secured eight fellowships from the Ford Foundation, a longtime UNESCO partner.⁹⁷ Słonimski had dreamed of this for years: already in 1946, he imagined “creating a literary foundation . . . that would allow a few dozen writers from each country to travel abroad.”⁹⁸ His ZLP would realize these dreams on Polish soil, thanks largely to UNESCO funding and connections.

Słonimski’s program for the ZLP was an extraordinary effort to transplant UNESCO policies to communist conditions. To an extent, the writer leaned on what he knew; having worked out a plan for helping fellow writers after WWII, Słonimski was eager for a second chance to implement it. At the same time, relying on UNESCO was a calculated strategy. Słonimski aimed to open Poland to the world, breaking its isolation from the west and ending its dependence on the Soviet Union. Yet he was acutely conscious of the fact that Poland could not leave the bloc and thus had to tread carefully. “Our writers are aware of Poland’s special situation between east and west and are practicing a kind of self-restraint,” he told the *New York Times* in 1959.⁹⁹ UNESCO was a useful model for this tightrope act, both because it had experience navigating between blocs and because it was palatable to Polish (and Soviet) authorities. While they allowed more contact with the capitalist world, post-Stalinist leaders continued to worry about the corrosive effects of western influence. Słonimski felt considerable pressure to reduce this influence on the ZLP, and in his public statements always stressed that Poland was a “country building socialism.”¹⁰⁰ Engaging with UNESCO, to which both Poland and the Soviet Union belonged, was less provocative than interacting with the capitalist west. It was an opportunity to build connections with the outside world without alarming communist officials—or so Słonimski hoped.

Because His Name Was Known Abroad

Roughly a year into his presidency, in October 1957, Słonimski flew to Tokyo for a UNESCO congress. This gathering was part of the Major Project for Mutual Appreciation of Cultural Values of East and West, a new initiative designed to mitigate UNESCO’s Eurocentrism.¹⁰¹ Słonimski attended as a representative of the west, alongside such writers as John Steinbeck and Ignazio Silone, yet could not shake the sense that his experience was nothing like theirs. In his address, he highlighted the specificity of eastern Europe, which was just emerging from Stalinism. “Recent times have seen life itself and personal freedom dependent on the sentence of a powerful deity and on the whim of a galaxy of vindictive demons,” the writer told a rapt audience. “We have no certainty that that era will not be repeated. How, then, shall we give battle to such resurgent demons?” He answered his own question by

⁹⁵ Słonimski, *Ciekawość: Felietony 1973–1976* (Warsaw, 1981), 32–33.

⁹⁶ “Antoni Słonimski—obok Steinbecka,” 3. According to Słonimski, Jean Paul Sartre was slated to write an introduction to the anthology.

⁹⁷ Woźniakowski, *Między ubezwłasnowolnieniem a opozycją*, 130. On links between the Ford Foundation and UNESCO, see Maurel, *Histoire de l’UNESCO*, 26.

⁹⁸ Karolina Beylin, “Czy uda się stworzyć międzynarodowego człowieka. Rozmowa z Antonim Słonimskim w UNESCO,” *Express wieczorny* 1, no. 155 (October 1946): 2.

⁹⁹ S. L. Shneiderman, “Poland: A Report on Recent Literary Trends,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 1959, BR62.

¹⁰⁰ Słonimski, “Miesiąc książki,” *Nowa Kultura* 9, no. 18 (May 1958): 1.

¹⁰¹ For more on the Project, see Laura Elizabeth Wong, “Relocating East and West: UNESCO’s Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values,” *Journal of World History* 19, no. 3 (September 2008): 349–74.

quoting Confucius: “have as little to do with them as possible.”¹⁰² In a conversation with his old UNESCO colleague, Stephen Spender—by then the editor of *Encounter*, a journal funded by the CIA—the writer went even further. “Stalinism was the biggest failure in history,” Słonimski told Spender. And then, referring to Poland’s new leader, “He smiled and added, ‘Mr. Gomulka [sic] does not like me saying that.’”¹⁰³

Indeed, free speech had emerged as the core point of contention between the ZLP and the regime. The union congress that elected Słonimski called for “the destruction of all forms of preventive censorship” along with “the removal of prohibitions in reading rooms and libraries.”¹⁰⁴ Two years later the situation had barely improved, forcing the union president to strike a more aggressive tone. At the 1958 ZLP congress, Słonimski criticized communist officials “who look over our shoulder into our poems, novels, articles, creating an atmosphere of agitation and danger that is not healthy for the profession.”¹⁰⁵ Even this comment, though, was phrased as a suggestion for restoring “mutual trust between the authorities and the artistic community.”¹⁰⁶ At home, Słonimski chose his words carefully to avoid antagonizing the regime. Abroad, by contrast, he felt free to speak his mind, and used UNESCO congresses to say what he could not in Poland.

As it turned out, “vindictive demons” were impossible to avoid, however far the writer traveled. As soon as he returned from Tokyo, Słonimski was called into the Prime Minister’s office for a formal reprimand. For his next trip abroad—to attend UNESCO’s Tenth General Conference, held in Paris in November 1958—Słonimski was instructed to keep silent. Polish officials were especially concerned that he would broach the case of Boris Pasternak, the Soviet writer who had just received a Nobel Prize. In his capacity as ZLP president, Słonimski had sent Pasternak a congratulatory telegram; when Pasternak declined the prize a few days later, under government pressure, Słonimski’s telegram became a liability. Western reporters saw it as a sign of fractures in the eastern bloc and lined up to speak with Słonimski in Paris. The writer declined all requests, as instructed, but still found a way to make himself heard. In a poem titled “UNESCO,” he summed up what he saw in Paris: “in the bars, cafeterias, and corridors / An agreeable choir repeated: / That Artigas, that Picasso, / That al fresco, that Henry Moore, that UNESCO.” The poem’s second verse, however, took an abrupt turn: “And meanwhile in the distant north / In the wet fog, on a birch bench / There sat in front of a dacha / A poet. Diogenes in a barrel, / Its staves / Tightening his heart with despair.”¹⁰⁷ Słonimski recited the poem at the next ZLP meeting in Warsaw on December 4. When he finished, “there was great applause in the hall of the Polish Union of Writers,” the *New York Times* reported. “No one mentioned the name of Boris Pasternak . . . No one had to.”¹⁰⁸

For Polish leaders, this insolence was the last straw. A volume of Słonimski’s theater reviews was abruptly banned and its whole print run pulped. Poland’s secret police started tapping the writer’s phone, opened his letters, and followed him around.¹⁰⁹ Seeing the writing on the wall, Słonimski did not stand for reelection at the next ZLP congress, held that December. He was being phased out of Poland’s public life—and yet his ties to international organizations kept him in the spotlight. Three days after his reading of “UNESCO,” Słonimski appeared on US television as part of a transatlantic conversation with pianist Arthur Rubinstein and poet Archibald MacLeish. The discussion was moderated by CBS journalist Edward R. Murrow, who had approached the participants at the General Conference in Paris. He touched on everything that Polish leaders had been hoping to avoid: the telegram to

¹⁰² Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Return to Japan* (Philadelphia, 1960), 17.

¹⁰³ Stephen Spender, “Notes from a Diary,” *Encounter* 52 (January 1958): 56–58, here 58.

¹⁰⁴ “Uchwały VII Zjazdu Związku Literatów Polskich,” *Nowa Kultura* 7, no. 50 (December 1956): 1.

¹⁰⁵ Marek Radziwon, *Iwaskiewicz: Pisarz po katastrofie* (Warsaw, 2010), 355.

¹⁰⁶ Słonimski, “Miesiąc książki,” 1.

¹⁰⁷ “UNESCO,” in Słonimski, *Poezje zebrane* (Warsaw, 1964), 542.

¹⁰⁸ “Lament for Pasternak Applauded in Warsaw,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1958, 2.

¹⁰⁹ Joanna Siedlecka, *Kryptonim “Liryka”: Bezpieka wobec literatów* (Warsaw, 2009), 11–51.

Pasternak, problems with censorship, and writers' marginal place in society. Although it was not shown in Poland, the interview was broadcast by the BBC and other networks around the world, helping Słonimski build a global profile. When US vice president Richard Nixon visited Warsaw a year later—on his way back from the Kitchen Debate in Moscow—he met with Słonimski and insisted that the writer's TV appearance had been “a big success.”¹¹⁰

This international visibility, in turn, affected what Słonimski did at home. After stepping down from the ZLP, the writer began to model himself on Diogenes. He spent his days at Warsaw's Café March, pointing out communist hypocrisy and penning protest letters to officials. “Organizing and signing protests became with time my normal, almost daily function,” Słonimski joked in his memoirs.¹¹¹ Many of his letters feature prominently in the narrative of Poland's “road to freedom,” including the Letter of 34 (1963), a critique of government censorship, and the Letter of 59 (1976), which led to the formation of the Workers' Defense Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*, KOR).¹¹² Such letters relied on making waves abroad, both to amplify their impact and to protect signatories from persecution. It was essential that the signatories be familiar to the west, and here Słonimski's prominence at UNESCO was a major asset. In the western press, he was always among the few signatories mentioned by name. As the French newspaper *Le Monde* explained, the writer was “universally known” because he was “for many years a delegate to UNESCO.”¹¹³

As retribution for the letters, Słonimski faced constant harassment in Poland, including publishing bans and prohibitions on traveling abroad. After a wave of student protests in March 1968, he even became the face of the regime's “anti-Zionist” campaign, which blamed all the unrest on Jews and urged them to emigrate. In a televised speech, Władysław Gomułka dug up an old newspaper column from 1924. “I have no national feelings at all; I feel neither Polish nor Jewish,” Słonimski had written, and Gomułka seized on his words to raise the specter of a “cosmopolitan” conspiracy.¹¹⁴ Yet intermittent attacks and restrictions always subsided, not least because of international attention. Polish “authorities cared about appearances and sometimes wanted to portray themselves as liberal,” recalled Słonimski's friend and colleague Julia Hartwig. They allowed the writer more freedom at home “because his name was known abroad from his time working at UNESCO.”¹¹⁵ At times, Słonimski was even trotted out to meet foreign dignitaries, as a living testament to the regime's open-mindedness. Visiting Warsaw in 1967, French president Charles de Gaulle assured the writer that he was “known in France,” and was assured that Słonimski did not suffer persecution.¹¹⁶

Słonimski, for his part, continued to make use of opportunities that international organizations provided. Congresses abroad allowed him to sidestep the censorship he faced in Poland. During one PEN-Club meeting in West Germany, he backed a western resolution in defense of Czechoslovak dissidents, to the dismay of communist officials.¹¹⁷ At home, Słonimski used UNESCO documents to show that the regime had not lived up to its commitments. One newspaper column cited the UNESCO Constitution to make the case that, as a signatory, the Polish state had to “respect the right to [print] objective information.”¹¹⁸ This argument anticipated the Letter of 59, which called on the regime to recognize all

¹¹⁰ Słonimski, *Alfabet*, 132.

¹¹¹ Słonimski, *Alfabet*, 195. Ostensibly this line referred to Słonimski's interwar activism, but parallels to the present day were hard to miss.

¹¹² Alexander Matejko, “‘Solidarity’—Polish Road to Freedom,” *The Polish Review* 27, no. 3/4 (1982): 196–201.

¹¹³ “Dans les pays de l'Est,” *Le Monde*, July 19, 1965, 4; “Après trois ans de disgrâce le poète Antoni Słonimski publie un livre,” *Le Monde*, July 24, 1971, 5.

¹¹⁴ Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Słonimski*, 398–99. For more on 1968 in Poland, see Jerzy Eisler, *Polski rok 1968* (Warsaw, 2006), and Dariusz Stola, *Kampania antysyjonistyczna w Polsce, 1967–1968* (Warsaw, 2000).

¹¹⁵ Julia Hartwig, “Wspomnienie o Antonim,” in Kądzelski and Międzyrzejcki, eds., *Wspomnienia*, 47.

¹¹⁶ *Radio France Internationale*, “Antoni Słonimski w Paryżu” at www.polskieradio.pl/68/2461/Audio/285994,Antoni-Slonimski-w-Paryzu (accessed June 6, 2024).

¹¹⁷ Władysław Bartoszewski, “Mój Słonimski,” in Kądzelski and Międzyrzejcki, eds., *Wspomnienia*, 22.

¹¹⁸ Słonimski, “Żal,” in Słonimski, *Obecność: Felietony 1971–1972* (Warsaw, 1973), 38.

the “civil liberties” it promised in theory but curtailed in practice. The Letter referenced the recently signed Helsinki Accords, leading scholars to speak of a “Helsinki effect” on democratic activism in eastern Europe.¹¹⁹ Yet the Letter only noted that “the conference at Helsinki . . . solemnly confirmed ‘the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’” adopted by the UN in 1948.¹²⁰ Słonimski saw himself as a co-author of the Declaration, having served on a committee that “prepared the fundamental framework” for it during his time at UNESCO.¹²¹ In signing the Letter of 59—just months before he died in July 1976—the writer harkened back to his UNESCO roots, and used them one last time to overcome Cold War divisions.

“I recently read in the paper / That I am sitting between two stools,” Słonimski wrote in a 1947 poem, published in Poland while he was living in England. “That one is London / And the other the Soviets. / The writer from the paper didn’t know / That there is also a third stool. / . . . You can see many people / And wide lands from this stool. / You can see right and left / And barely see that fool.”¹²² While working at UNESCO, Słonimski had hoped that the organization would be his “third stool”: a respite from the superpower conflict in which his life was becoming rapidly embroiled. But UNESCO, too, got swept up in the worldwide competition between east and west, failing to provide a viable alternative. Unstable as it was, however, this third stool helped Słonimski move between the other two. For the rest of his life, the writer refused to be conscribed by Cold War binaries: to pick between east and west, liberalism and socialism, state patronage and creative freedom. He used UNESCO and its affiliates to maneuver between these poles while trying to bring them closer together. To overcome the fractures of a Cold War world, Słonimski turned to international organizations.

UNESCO ties enabled the life and career the writer made in communist Poland. His time with the Preparatory Commission convinced Słonimski that he could work with communist authorities and share their goals. It also raised his stature in their eyes, helping him land lucrative jobs leading the Institute of Polish Culture and co-organizing the Wrocław Congress. Once he moved back to Warsaw, Słonimski drew on his experience with UNESCO to carve out a niche as a commentator on western affairs. It allowed him to avoid having to praise the building of socialism and to continue writing in his caustic style, which fostered dialogue with the west. As president of the ZLP, Słonimski used UNESCO to forge connections and exchanges with the outside world. He also took advantage of UNESCO congresses to speak more bluntly than he could at home, putting pressure on Polish authorities while building an international reputation. When he was forced to step down from the ZLP, this reputation helped Słonimski become an outspoken critic of communist rule. His prominence at UNESCO protected him from the worst of government retribution even as it brought global attention to the petitions he drafted. It empowered Słonimski to transcend the limits of the eastern bloc and advocate for the “unified world” he had long championed.

Słonimski was a singular figure, one of the most original and celebrated writers of his time. Yet his experience illuminates how Poles made use of international organizations to cross the boundaries of a bipolar world. At times, this involved physical crossings: Słonimski attended nearly a dozen congresses abroad, both in the west and the Global South. Even within the borders of the bloc, international organizations enabled contact with the outside world. They helped maintain a common language between camps

¹¹⁹ Daniel Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton, 2001).

¹²⁰ Edward Lipiński, “The Letter of 59 Intellectuals to the Speaker of the Diet of the Polish People’s Republic,” *The Polish Review* 51, no. 1 (2006): 95–98, here 95.

¹²¹ Słonimski, “Tenth Anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights,” *Polish Perspectives* 2 (1959): 37–38. This article originally appeared as “Dziesięciolecie Praw Człowieka,” in *Nowa Kultura* 9, no. 51 (December 1958): 1.

¹²² Słonimski, “Stółek,” *Nowiny Literackie* 1, no. 31 (October 1947).

and fostered intellectual exchanges, especially after the Stalin era. As the example of Słonimski's ZLP suggests, international organizations could be used as models for reform, introducing new standards and practices from beyond the Iron Curtain. They could also help the bloc's residents to circumvent its constraints, above all censorship and persecution. For internationalists like Słonimski, organizations like UNESCO were a lifeline in an era of global division. They helped the writer to expand his world, and to build a more open, integrated world in the process.

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