

Between Orientalism and Universalism: A Global Perspective on the Popularization of Body-Oriented Yoga Practices in the People's Republic of Poland 1956-1970

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In the mid-1960s, the People's Republic of Poland experienced a craze for *hatha yoga*. Popular magazines circulated self-help yoga instructions, well-known actresses endorsed its health benefits, and yoga classes could be found in central Warsaw. My paper provides an explanation for the (seemingly) paradoxical popularity of body-oriented yoga practices in a socialist country by tracing the global cultural transfers and legitimization strategies that led to their adoption and institutionalization. I argue that the strengthening of Polish-Indian relations within the global geopolitical landscape after 1956 created a space of opportunity for individual and collective actors from both countries to participate in the ongoing global project of modernizing und universalizing yoga. In particular, Polish yoga propagator Malina Michalska, the Polish-Indian Friendship Society, and Ma Yogashakti from the Bihar School of Yoga presented yoga to the Polish public as a preventive health practice largely devoid of religious or ideological associations. They portrayed the adoption of yoga as a transformation of arcane Indian wisdom into humanistic and universally applicable knowledge that is firmly grounded in the principles of modern medical science and wholly aligned with official socialist ideology. This framing, in turn, is indicative of the Polish perception of India during the 1960s, where both conventional Orientalist ideas and newer universalist tendencies intersected. By analyzing the popularization of yoga in a country behind the so-called Iron Curtain, this paper aims to integrate the under-researched region of Eastern Europe into the history of global transfers of yogic knowledge and practice.

Subject areas: global history, Slavic Studies

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