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## From the Writer

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Having my entire family from Poland has no doubt influenced my deep interest in Poland's history and my love of the culture and language. After reading about Naomi Klein's pessimistic views on Poland's economic transition after 1989 in her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, I drew a connection to the dreary imagery of Warsaw around this time as portrayed in Andrzej Stasiuk's novel *Nine*. I agreed with Klein's assertions that Poland's transition from a controlled to a market economy was mishandled, thus making the daily lives of Poles more difficult. I set about to support this with Stasiuk's gloomy descriptions of Warsaw's landscape in *Nine*, which I felt illustrated the struggle of many at the time.

What I found most difficult about writing this paper was its organization. I found that making several outlines before writing helped me organize the paper and see what information to include in each paragraph. However, formulating my argument and addressing it properly was time consuming and took several drafts to properly complete.

Comments from students and my professor helped me notice flaws in my argument in addition to giving me helpful suggestions on how to improve my paper. After reading my first draft, students said that I should add more of Klein's statistics to the paper to strengthen my argument, as it is her statistics and facts that I am agreeing with. One student also pointed out that I should expand upon the references to cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol in Stasiuk's *Nine*. The feedback I received from both students and my professor was especially beneficial to my writing process as it helped me strengthen my paper and improve on weak areas in my writing.

Though I am pleased with the final draft of this assignment, I think that it would be stronger if I used more examples from both books. I feel that my thesis would be better supported if I added more of Klein's assertions and statistics about the difficulty of daily life in Poland in the wake of its economic transition. In addition, I would perhaps add more interpretations of the descriptions of Warsaw in Stasiuk's *Nine*.

— Gabrielle Migdalski

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GABRIELLE MIGDALSKI

## THE PORTRAYAL OF DESPAIR IN POLAND AFTER 1989: STASIUK'S *NINE* AND KLEIN'S *THE SHOCK DOCTRINE*

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Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* portrays Poland, immediately after its transition to a market economy, as a severely disorganized, poverty-stricken, and betrayed country. This is a country that hoped for a positive change, was promised one by the economists of the IMF and the World Bank, and was ultimately let down by these organizations through the rapid enforcement of strict measures on governing the economy. The depiction of this time period in Andrzej Stasiuk's novel *Nine* is no less optimistic, translating Klein's percentages and information into bleak and depressing images and descriptions of Poland in the wake of its transition. This depression is most visible through Stasiuk's vivid and detailed descriptions of Warsaw's landscapes and surroundings, in addition to his characters' alcohol and drug use. These images evoke the bewilderment, hopelessness, and loss that many Poles felt when their country's transition to a new economy did not reap the fruits that they had hoped for, hitting them quickly and with full force. Stasiuk's *Nine* serves as a visual aid to Klein's assertions in *The Shock Doctrine*, and together these two works demonstrate the damaging effects of Poland's shaky shift from a controlled to a market economy.

Klein offers some telling statistics about Poland's situation after 1989, which are further reinforced by other sources discussing Poland's transition. After Poland's triumph over communism through Solidarity's legalization and victory in the country's election, the state of Poland's economy already seemed dire. Klein states that "When Solidarity took office, debt was \$40 billion, inflation was at 600 percent, and there were severe food shortages and a thriving black market" (220). After Poland

accepted the IMF's financial aid in exchange for the quick imposition of the IMF's economic measures, the standard of living dropped drastically within only a few years. Stanislaw Wellisz, in his 1991 article "Poland Under 'Solidarity' Rule," states that "food now takes up over 55 percent of the average consumer's budget, vs. less than 40 percent in the first half of 1989" (1). This illustrates how basic necessities were becoming more difficult to afford during this time period. Unemployment soared during this time, with 2.8 million people out of work in 1992, "of whom 80 percent had been previously employed," according to Mieczyslaw Waclaw Socha and Yaacov Weisberg in their 1999 article "Poland in Transition: Labor Market Data Collection" (1). Klein points out that these high unemployment figures lingered on, even when Poland joined the European Union over a decade later, stating that Poland, according to the World Bank's figures at the time, "[had] an unemployment rate of 20 percent—the highest in the European Union" (241). These depressing statistics propel Klein's fervent tirade against the IMF's and the World Bank's forced and drastic transition in Poland and other countries shifting from a communist to a capitalist economy.

The Poles had seemingly triumphed over the Communists through the Solidarity movement, but had been forced into a radical transition that left them with lower standards of living than in times under communism. They felt lost and uncertain. In reference to poverty, Klein remarks that "15 percent of the population of Poland lived below the poverty line in 1989, in stark contrast to 59 percent in 2003" (241–242). People had lost their savings due to inflation, and with food prices rising, they were barely surviving. These, among Klein's other compelling statistics, successfully support her claim that Poland's and other countries' transitions to capitalist economies were mishandled by the IMF and the World Bank. Though Klein does fail, at least in Poland's case, to offer an alternative to the "shock therapy" program, which would at least give her outburst against the negative aspects of "shock therapy" a bit more credibility, she nonetheless uses key facts and statistics that successfully uphold her argument, which can be reinforced by other sources discussing the same time period in Poland. These descriptions of Poland at this time demonstrate that the standard of living was far from ideal. Such a drastic transition was detrimental to

society, especially if the country, nearly two decades later, is still showing the negative traces of the effects of its mishandled transition.

Poland's instability and the damaging effects of its transition are convincingly illustrated through the imagery and descriptions of Warsaw's surroundings in Stasiuk's novel *Nine*. The story follows a young businessman, Pawel, who is on the run to find the money to pay back loan sharks that ripped him off in the past. Throughout the novel, Stasiuk makes many diversions from the plot to describe the drab and depressing surroundings and landscape to evoke the struggle of the many who are barely scraping by in the aftermath of Poland's transition to a market economy. Homes are dreary and dull, "gray and square-cornered" (Stasiuk 4). In one instance, Stasiuk describes an area where "the buildings came to a sudden end to make room for the tapered bulk of a church," whose "brickwork had the color of congealed blood" (4). The buildings are unattractive and austere, reflecting the poverty of many and also harking back to Klein's depressing statistic on Poland's poor. Gloom and despair are all that exist, as if hope for a better future is lost. Though these buildings were built years before Poland's transition to a market economy, they symbolize the fact that for many, nothing has changed for the better. People were promised a better life under a new system, but their lives remain difficult and stressful, just as the buildings remain shabby and depressing.

A similarly bleak landscape is portrayed at the airport at Okecie, in which "inky lights behind a chain-link fence summon the planes, and the distant control towers are like the tops of sinking ships. The roar in the sky makes the earth seem twice as large, and uninhabited" (Stasiuk 50). The landscape is bare and desolate, as if death is imminent. The eerie image of "inky lights . . . [summoning] the planes" while the control towers resemble "sinking ships" almost suggests that as the planes land at the airport they simultaneously descend into a kind of hell (Stasiuk 50). This dramatic and ghostly picture seems to serve as a pessimistic symbol for the present and future of Poland in the novel, implying that the end of an era has arrived, and that a new, unfamiliar, and difficult era has begun.

The almost constant presence of cigarettes and cigarette smoke amongst these barren buildings reinforces this feeling of hopelessness. For example, Stasiuk describes, "The crooked wooden structures of Grochow, Kolo and Mlynów with walls in abstract patterns grimy from the smoke

of filterless cigarettes, Mazurs, Sports, Wawels, and filter tips like Silesias and Zeniths,” and later describes Pawel “[lighting] a cigarette to measure time” as the “wind blew from around the corner, making sparks” (43, 54). This emphasis on cigarettes evokes the idea of smoking as a distraction, to escape the fear and struggle of daily life during this time of instability in Poland. Characters throughout the novel are almost always smoking, whether with friends or with enemies, in groups or alone. Smoking is almost a way of life for these characters, as the constant references to cigarette types and brands also demonstrate.

In the novel, specific types of cigarettes, filterless or filter tip cigarettes, and their brand names are associated with a certain social status. Filterless cigarettes seem to suggest an image of strength and wealth, one that perhaps Pawel, coming from a poor background, might aspire to. Pawel’s first prized possession, which he saves up for while working, is an expensive Chinese cigarette lighter “of the kind he dreamed about every time he passed a kiosk,” which was “decorated with pictures of birds of paradise” (Stasiuk 138). Though now many associate Chinese products with cheapness and poor quality, the lighter is a symbol of the exotic and of wealth to the teenage Pawel, who could seemingly escape from his difficult life and low social standing just by owning and using this foreign lighter. At times Stasiuk uses a brand as a key descriptor of a character. For example, a man, unidentified by name, wears “khaki shorts . . . a death’s-head signet ring . . . [and] he [smokes] Wawels” (Stasiuk 147). The fact that the brand of cigarette that the character smokes is juxtaposed alongside conventional descriptions such as physical appearance also emphasizes the importance of cigarettes in the novel and how the type and brand are labels of social status. The novel’s many references to smoking and cigarettes signify the importance of smoking and cigarettes in these characters’ difficult daily lives during this time in Poland.

The constant presence of alcohol and drugs in the novel also reflects the worrying and uncertainty of the time. Bolek’s wealth, due to his success from buying and selling drugs with his colleagues, attests to the demand for drugs and shows that many in the novel desire to escape their hard lives through the mental rush of a drug. Drinking alcohol to feel safe from the harsh reality the characters are faced with is another important aspect of the novel. One of the many examples illustrating this is when

Pawel meets with the man in the purple tracksuit in Beata's apartment. The man orders Luska to pour Pawel a glass, and when Pawel appears hesitant, the man urges, "Come on, just the one. Don't be shy. Tastes good, does you good," implying that the alcohol will help Pawel relax and perhaps improve his state of mind (Stasiuk 104). An example that perhaps encapsulates the idea of drinking as a means of escape from reality is when Pawel is waiting for Jacek at the Filipinka bar. Pawel worries that Jacek might not come back so "he [takes] a long drink to forget all that and [gets] back to his memories, which [are] safe" (Stasiuk 75). This example shows Pawel using alcohol to distract him from his worries by relaxing him and bringing him back to stable and perhaps peaceful and happier memories. He is restless over his situation and how he will obtain the money to pay back the loan sharks, so he drinks when he can for temporary relaxation and for a release from his worries.

The many images of alcohol and drug use in the novel are directly reflected in Klein's statistics on Russia, another country that faced a drastic economic transition. In reference to alcohol use there, Klein states that "Under capitalism . . . Russians drink more than twice as much alcohol as they used to," and in reference to drug use, she states that "Russia's drug czar, Aleksandr Mikhailov, says that the number of users [of painkillers] went up 900 percent from 1994 to 2004, to more than 4 million people, many of them heroin addicts" (300). Life for many was indeed fearful during this time, with many left uncertain about their futures as a result of their country's mismanaged economic transition. Stasiuk clearly illustrates the hopelessness, dreariness, and uncertainty of the times, reinforcing the idea that the IMF's and the World Bank's measures for modernization forced upon Poland and other countries were far too drastic and proved damaging to the lives of millions of Eastern Europeans.

As emphasized by Klein's figures and Stasiuk's imagery and descriptions, it is evident that the strict measures enforced upon Poland's economy by the World Bank and the IMF proved detrimental to the plans for a smooth transition from a controlled to a market economy, causing many to suffer dearly under the drastic changes that took place. Though Poland and other countries were being transitioned into seemingly efficient systems that were intended to improve the lives of citizens who struggled under communism, the daily lives of many did not change

for the better. Klein successfully proves her point that the lives of generations of Poles and other Eastern Europeans have changed for the worse as a result of “shock therapy.” Had Poland’s economy been handled and changed over a longer period of time, perhaps with certain economic regulations and measures being implemented gradually, it is quite possible that the drastic rises in poverty and unemployment wouldn’t have occurred. The country would have had time to adjust and so would its citizens. Regrettably, in Poland’s and many other countries’ cases, such a drastic adjustment from communism and a controlled economy to democracy and a market economy was simply mishandled. We must hope that if a need for such a transition arises in the future, that we will take time to examine and tend to each country’s specific needs and to learn from past mistakes.

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