

Musicking in the Merry Ghetto:
The Czech Underground from the 1960s to the 2000s

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ABSTRACT

By investigating the case of the Czech Underground from the 1960s to the 2000s, this thesis seeks to explore ways in which an enacted cultural space enables acts of ‘togetherness’ and as such ‘protects’ or ‘immunizes’ individuals and groups from perceived forms of oppression. The data presented in this thesis is taken from an ethnographic and archival study of the Underground through interviews, participant observation and archival research in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. I describe how the term ‘Underground’ does not refer to a physical place but rather to a conceptual and symbolic space or set of occasions where dispositions are learned, maintained and adapted and where the world can be viewed, imagined and acted upon. I describe how that space was created through the location, arrangement and informal learning about how to appropriate a cluster of cultural practices and materials: physical appearances, actions, felt dispositions, mental states and objects. For those who became part of this Underground, to varying degrees, this cluster of cultural practices facilitated embodied, emotional and cognitive postures toward social and cultural life in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. These postures were in turn a platform for collective experience. I examine actors as they furnished this Underground cultural space through locating, opening up and crafting available aesthetic resources in local environments. My focus is on ‘non-official’ musicking practices in Czechoslovakia starting from the 1960s such as listening to the radio, seeking out records tapes, listening to LPs, growing long hair, illegal concerts, and home-studio recordings. Within these practices, I look to how aesthetic material—raw, un-tuned, heavy—took hold and provided a resource for the

bases of community activity. Through these grounded examples, I show how a group of people assembled a parallel aesthetic ecology that allowed for acts of rejecting and communing, the doing of resistance. In this way, I attempt to show how resistance became a form of immunity or ‘cocooning’ against unwanted cultural material and thus a technology of health at the community level.

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