

# Fascinating World of Iron Curtain Shop Windows

By [Evelyn Cavalla](#)

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The photos go up to 1990. Above, a shop selling military shirts in Moscow.

David Hlynsky's "Window-Shopping through the Iron Curtain" charts one photographer's travels in Moscow, Krakow, Budapest, Prague and other Eastern Bloc cities from 1986 to 1990, through the medium of the shop window. Hlynsky's shots are simple, the shop windows basic, half empty, sometimes kitschy, very different: a plastic woman wrapped in tinsel in a nightclub window; a row of clocks and a crosshatch of watches, accessorized with a single fake flower.

See the Photo Gallery: [Three Loaves of Bread, and other Iron Curtain Window Displays](#)

"I mainly focus on the idea that banal photographs are very, very important to human culture. The dramatic photographs can be dramatic or contrived or out of the ordinary, but the banal photographs really tell us what's happening," said Hlynsky in a Skype interview from Toronto, where he is a senior lecturer in the Arts, Culture and Media department at the

University of Toronto Scarborough.

The windows are a glimpse into the state economy common to the countries behind the Iron Curtain, where shops were almost the same as were prices and shortages, where the Western world of advertising was far, far away.

"I have about 8,000 pictures from that period, and about four or five hundred of them are of store windows. The rest of them are portraits, pedestrian shots, pictures of people I met, wedding shots, landscapes, farms, things like that. But over the years I've found that the store windows are the things that people are surprised by the most," he said.

A stranger who knew little of what was going on behind these Iron Curtain windows, Hlynsky developed his own theories after looking at and taking so many photos.

"It's obvious, for example, that some products in some windows were arranged more lovingly than others," he writes in the introduction to the book. "Consider these windows as still life art projects performed in the psychological and financial space between the State and the native shopper."

Unlike the West, he writes, "the windows were devoid of calculated sexual seduction. But they were adorned with traditional yet incongruous signs of general cheer: paper flowers and butterflies, mushrooms, leaves, happy children. Some were amusing."

Hlynsky writes of the different reactions to his photos: The younger generation views them as quaint, whereas the older generation can be moved to tears.

"After the wall came down, a lot of East Berliners rushed to the West to cash in on all the promises that Western advertising had provided for them. And when they got there they realized that all those magical flavors — instant sex and instant prosperity — all those things weren't as satisfying as they had been led to believe, and then they became nostalgic," he said.

Hlynsky has some of that nostalgia himself. He describes the effect communism had on the work of photographers he met during his travels. "There wasn't the kind of advertising ... pressure that produces the kind of spotless images that we have now," he said. "We don't just have a picture of a car. We have a picture of a spotless car, over an endless desert, with a beautiful girl in it, and the wheels spinning away. The aesthetic was different then, because although they were seeing Western-style advertising, they weren't asked to replicate it."

"The work one of my friends was doing was very personal. He used to make pictures with his own shadow, on the ground, on the building, on a forest, all with the sun directly behind him. I assume that he saw that as having political import, and I found that the artists I met along the way were political, but their symbolism was more calculated, more hidden. Obvious, maybe to them, but not necessarily dangerous to the authorities."

The same coded politics were, Hlynsky writes in his introduction, occasionally woven into window displays. "I saw a Polish circus poster once that illustrated a performer riding a unicycle with a single square wheel. Above her head was the single word: 'circus.' Later my friends told me that 'circus' was slang for government."

Hlynsky hasn't returned to Moscow since the wall fell, but he says a number of times during

the interview that he would love to come back and see what's changed. He remembers clean streets, few homeless people, an Arbat with no Hard Rock Cafe and a slower pace of life.

"Back in the mid-eighties I would go to my Polish photographer friends' house for dinner, and they had all the time in the world to have long suppers, and we would sit and we would talk all night long — about books, about music, about art. I've been back to stay with him a few times since, and his life has changed," he said. "He was getting up at 6 a.m. and doing high-pressure advertising shoots, and he had no time to talk about anything. But he did have a jacuzzi and a new car and a condo. So the prosperity did come true, but it came at a price."

*David Hlynsky's "Window-Shopping Through the Iron Curtain" is published by Thames & Hudson and is available at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).*

Contact the author at [artsreporter@imedia.ru](mailto:artsreporter@imedia.ru)

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