By the end of the 1950s Hungary became an unlikely leader in what we now call global health. Only three years after Soviet tanks crushed the revolution of 1956, Hungary became one of the first countries to introduce the Sabin vaccine into its national vaccination programme. This immunisation campaign was built on years of scientific collaboration between East and West, in which scientists, specimens, vaccines and iron lungs crossed over the Iron Curtain. Dóra Vargha uses a series of polio epidemics in communist Hungary to understand the response to a global public health emergency in the midst of the Cold War. She argues that despite the antagonistic international atmosphere of the 1950s, spaces of transnational cooperation between blocs emerged to tackle a common health crisis. At the same time, she shows that epidemic concepts and policies were influenced by the very Cold War rhetoric that medical and political cooperation transcended. Also available as Open Access.

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Global Health Histories aims to publish outstanding and innovative scholarship on the history of public health, medicine and science worldwide. By studying the many ways in which the impact of ideas of health and well-being on society were measured and described in different global, international, regional, national and local contexts, books in the series reconceptualise the nature of empire, the nation state, extra-state actors and different forms of globalisation. The series showcases new approaches to writing about the connected histories of health and medicine, humanitarianism, and global economic and social development.
Polio Across the Iron Curtain

Hungary’s Cold War with an Epidemic

Dóra Vargha

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