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## Cementing the Domestic Ideal? Negotiating *The Forsyte Saga* Across the Iron Curtain in the 1960s and 1970s

The BBC adaptation of *The Forsyte Saga* was broadcast in Britain in 1967. It rapidly became a global television phenomenon, reaching approximately 160 million viewers in seventy-seven countries. Within a few years, the serial circulated on both sides of the Iron Curtain, including the United States, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Its extraordinary popularity coincided with a period of intense renegotiation of gender norms, domestic ideals, and sexual politics in both capitalist and socialist societies.

This project uses *The Forsyte Saga* as a shared transnational reference point to explore how domesticity, patriarchy, women's emancipation, and sexual coercion in marriage were negotiated in the late 1960s and early 1970s across the East–West divide. Rather than approaching the series primarily as an instrument of cultural “soft power,” it treats it as a cultural lens: a narrative space through which audiences in divergent political systems confronted similar intimate dilemmas.

### **Domesticity and Its Discontents**

Nineteenth-century domesticity imagined the home as a refuge from modernity, structured by rigid gender divisions between public and private spheres. By the mid-twentieth century, these ideals had come under pressure. In Britain and the United States, second-wave feminism questioned the confinement of women to domestic roles and exposed the structural inequalities embedded in marriage. At the same time, historians have demonstrated that the so-called sexual revolution was gradual, uneven, and often more discursive than behavioral.

In socialist Central and Eastern Europe, official policy promoted women's participation in the workforce, yet this formal equality coexisted with re-traditionalized expectations regarding family life and motherhood. The late

1960s and early 1970s witnessed a complex mixture of reform, backlash, and normalization. Thus, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, domesticity remained a contested terrain rather than a settled norm.

Against this background, *The Forsyte Saga* offered audiences a “safe distance”: a historical British setting through which they could explore contemporary anxieties about marital authority, sexual entitlement, and female self-determination without directly confronting present political structures.

### **Research Questions and Transnational Lens**

The project addresses four interrelated questions:

- 1) How did viewers’ lived experiences of *The Forsyte Saga* reflect and negotiate domesticity, patriarchy, women’s emancipation, and sexual coercion in marriage at the time of broadcast?
- 2) How do present-day recollections of the series reinterpret these themes in light of subsequent feminist and post-socialist developments?
- 3) How were the serial’s gendered conflicts framed in contemporary media discourse in Britain, the United States, Poland, and Czechoslovakia?
- 4) What commonalities—and divergences—emerge across the East–West divide in both private reception and public representation?

By examining two Western (**Britain, United States**) and two Eastern (**Poland, Czechoslovakia**) contexts, the project avoids both Western universalism and Eastern exceptionalism. The Iron Curtain imposed geopolitical separation, yet the serial’s simultaneous circulation reveals a shared emotional vocabulary around marriage, property, and autonomy.

### **Sources and Methodological Approach**

The analysis triangulates multiple types of sources:

- Archival materials, including fan letters and broadcasting correspondence (where available), to reconstruct immediate audience reactions.
- Critical discourse analysis of contemporary press coverage in all four countries, identifying how media framed the series’ controversial themes.

- Oral-history interviews and focus groups with viewers, focusing on remembered emotional responses, moral judgments, and personal identifications with key characters.
- Digital ethnography as a supplementary method, examining contemporary online discussions and retrospective interpretations.

This multi-method approach addresses a central methodological challenge in audience history: the tension between contemporaneous documentation and retrospective memory. By systematically comparing period reactions with present-day recollections, the project illuminates not only how the serial was received, but how it has been re-narrated over time.

### **Preliminary Insights**

Preliminary research in Czechia and Britain suggests that audiences did not passively absorb the serial's moral framing. Viewers projected personal experiences onto characters. Notably, contemporary media in both East and West often dismissed the serial as "women's programming," even as evidence indicates broad cross-gender engagement.

Such findings complicate assumptions about linear feminist progress. Sympathy for patriarchal authority, discomfort with naming sexual coercion, and ambivalence toward female autonomy appeared in both blocs. At the same time, the very intensity of discussion—letters, debates, routine adjustments to watch episodes—demonstrates the series' capacity to transform private television viewing into a shared public conversation.

### **Contribution**

By placing *The Forsyte Saga* at the intersection of transnational cultural history and social and gender history, this project advances three broader arguments.

First, it challenges Cold War narratives that treat East and West as hermetically sealed ideological worlds. The reception of a British family saga reveals entangled concerns and parallel negotiations of intimacy and authority.

Second, it shifts the focus of global sixties scholarship from radical youth and overt political activism to the quieter, yet equally significant, arena of domestic life.

Third, it demonstrates how popular culture can function as an archive of emotional history. Through the prism of a period drama, audiences across divergent political systems confronted enduring questions: What does marriage authorize? What does emancipation require? Where does domestic stability end and coercion begin?

In tracing these negotiations across the Iron Curtain, the project proposes that the mental landscape of the late 1960s was more interconnected—and more ambivalent—than Cold War binaries allow.

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