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Collectivisation and Rural Communities as Exemplified by the Bydgoszcz Voivodeship (1948-1956)

This paper is of a highly archival nature, which has been dictated by the state of the academic research concerning the issues that are of interest to us. Historians, as well as representatives of other academic domains, have focused their attention mainly on issues connected with agrarian policy of the state and governing parties (PPR/PZPR), while the attitude of the agrarian community toward this policy has been either totally neglected or treated marginally in research conducted so far. As such, basic research has become an obvious necessity. This has left me with no choice but to take recourse to detailed, boring and unattractive sources, which were indispensable because of the present state of knowledge in this area.

An extended version of this paper, which was given to session organisers for printing, in its introductory part refers to agrarian issues within the programmes of social democratic and communist parties and those of the Bolshevik party, after they assumed political power in Russia. The meanderings of Leninist-Stalinist agrarian policy left their mark on the theoretical and practical solutions of the PPR.

The danger of collectivisation, a vision of well-known collective farms, was constantly present in Polish farmers' consciousness and dogged them incessantly almost from 17th September 1939 to as late as the breakthrough in the 1980's and 1990's. In the period of liberalisation in social and political life, after the twentieth assembly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, public opinion in Poland blamed collectivisation on Stalin, while Lenin was treated with considerable tolerance. Farmers claimed that collective farms were Stalin's invention and that if Lenin were alive, he "would disband all manufacturing collectives."

Moreover, in the introductory part I devoted some attention to Polish society's attitude to Communism, and especially to that of the rural community. In general, Communism was perceived pejoratively. The

country people associated Communism mainly with collective farms, and that is why they referred to this idea with open hostility. Communism was a symbol of evil and impiety. Farmers often explained, allegedly under the influence of the collectivists, that they would not join collectives, "because they did not want to be communists."

In Polish conditions, the idea of collectivisation was propagated in principle by those who were described by farmers as 'foreign' or 'urban' and who did not understand rural interrelations and farmers' mentalities. Very often, these were party and state activists of Jewish origin, a fact which was perceived as confirmation of the theory about the alienation of the Polish rural collectivisation programme, which considerably intensified farmers' mistrust of the contemporary governing elite's ideas on reform. The stereotype of 'Jewish communists' was still vivid and had a number of supporters. Expressing his opinion on agrarian policy in the period of 'mistakes and flaws', one of the well-known party activists, Leon Wiśniewski, in a paper delivered at the PZPR conference in the Bydgoszcz voivodeship in December 1956, included the following: "We rightly professed that the socialist reconstruction of the country would improve farmers' fate but we did not see or did not want to see that they would not notice any immediate benefit from the reconstruction of the country, and therefore, would resist it. This led to numerous problems. We wanted to carry out rural collectivisation at a rapid pace, by administrative means, without farmers, and in many cases against their will, which in consequence, led to festering in the relationships between the party and the working class on one side and active farmers on the other".

As mentioned earlier, the vision of collective farms constantly occupied Polish farmers' consciousness, but the genuine threat of collectivisation only appeared as late as the second half of 1948. It was a particularly tense and uneasy year in the history of Europe and Poland. In September 1948, Poles' attention was drawn to the civil war in Greece, in February the incidents in Czechoslovakia evoked a wave of comments, and in June the situation in Yugoslavia gained prominence. In international relations, there was already a conspicuous disagreement over the problem of Germany between the Soviet Union on one side and the United States and the Great Britain on the other. In different parts of the world, there were tension points which threatened an outbreak of hostilities at any moment. Polish public opinion vividly reacted to any semblance of deterioration in the international situation. Tension and war psychosis continued to rise.

In relation to the general international situation, certain radical changes in domestic policy took place, such as elimination of the opposition and whatever was left of PPS autonomy, Władysław Gomułka's dismissal, a sudden turn in agrarian and industrial policy, etc. It is obvious that

political, social, industrial and system reforms, even if they take place in the process of general evolution, without any disruptions, will always cause tension and anxiety. The degree of public anxiety could be regarded as proportional to the range, nature and pace of changes that were taking place. In the case of revolutionary and unpredictable changes (as was the nature of the changes being introduced by Polish political authorities at the turn of forties and fifties) Polish society lived with a constant sense of unease. No one was able to predict what the following day would bring.

Rural Poland was additionally upset by decisions on new taxation. Taxes have never been considered as 'pleasant' obligations towards the state, which is hardly surprising, especially if they are unfair, as was the case with land tax, which was paid partially with crops and with payments to the Social Fund of Agrarian Savings, and the situation was aggravated by a change in soil classification. However, the greatest social resonance was caused by the decision over collectivisation. This programme affected wide circles of Polish society, of which around seventy percent comprised country people; on the other hand, it hit the peasantry in their most sensitive point, as it started to question the right to private land property and to cast doubt on the traditional ways of cultivating 'their own fields'. One could write volumes about Polish the peasant's affinity with his land, his father's legacy, and his own property, but at this point it is merely worth indicating that the contemporary authorities realised the then state of affairs, and in spite of this, enforced collectivisation at any cost. While popularising collectives in a Toruń manufacturers in September 1948, a PPR speaker said with certain exaggeration, "Our Polish farmers are so strongly bound to their native fields that they would prefer to lose their entire families than to having to get rid of their own piece of land, which they consider to be the most precious thing in the world."

The fear of losing land was a common phenomenon and was recorded in numerous documents of the time. In reports discussing the course of informative meetings in September 1948 concerning the manufacturing collectives in the district of Rypin, it was remarked at the outset that "[i]n spite of irrefutable arguments provided by speakers, as well as numerous comments and exhaustive explanations, the only common denominator of those statements has been the fear of losing private property...". Sometimes, more courageous objectors accused the PPR of perversity and lies. In Szpetal Górny in the district of Lipno, in the presence of a senior party dignitary Władysław Dworakowski, one of the participants in the PPR assembly claimed "When Bierut distributed land, he said that it is your property forever, and now they are talking about the future integration of the economy." The explanations that peasants had not been cheated when told about permanent possession of land did not convince

anybody, and "[t]he participants, as it was recorded in the report, shook their heads, showing that they did not regard collective property as their own property."

Land distributors and peasants from the district of Aleksandrów claimed consistently that they did not want to belong to any collective because one had to work there together and, in their opinion, one could expect the best outcome when everyone worked on their own piece of land. They assured all present that they would pay all taxes to the last penny, and demanded that the advocates of manufacturing collectives "...leave us alone."

The Pomeranian peasants stubbornly defended private land ownership and traditional family farming. In this respect there were no initial differences between old farm owners and land distributors, though the latter were often in difficult financial straits and more easily yielded to economic pressure and exertion from the authorities. Very frequently, they simply had no choice, with a manufacturing collective representing the only way out and the only hope for improvement in their existence.

The political authorities must have been surprised by the attitude of land distributors, who defended their allocations unanimously and with determination, rejecting any thought about common farming. The assumption that it was the allotted villages that would be collectivised most quickly and without resistance appeared to be wrong. Peasants, land distributors, and former agrarian workers had no intention of returning to the situation of a couple of years earlier and starting their work from nothing on foreign fields. Despite the propagated theories about class conflict, the poor and not so poor who both went to make up the land distributors did not become natural allies in the struggle for rural socialism. They defended their property with a determination equal to that of wealthy peasants who had been cultivating their fathers' farms for generations. In Radomin, in the district of Rypin, one of the objectors said, "They told me not to give back the land that had been granted, even if I had to resort to sharp instruments; we do not support any collectives because no one even mentioned this when the land was lying neglected." Similarly, land distributors from other districts claimed that collectives should have been established in 1945, and not now, when the land had already been under their cultivation for some time.

In some surviving reports on the course of activities propagating manufacturing collectivity in 1948, as well as in other sources connected with this case, it is difficult to find any positive remarks from peasants on the subject of collectivisation which might be considered genuine. It was only those who had nothing to do with agriculture who favourably spoke of the alleged class fight and of collectivity. At the forefront of those

'experts' on manufacturing collectivity were party representatives, followed by administration representatives, members of the working class, occasionally agrarian workers, while peasants themselves either remained silent or expressed utterly different opinions. The reconstruction of the agrarian framework and ownership relations in rural Poland took place without the participation of the most interested parties. Once again on this occasion, the credit was given to ideology and doctrine.

During meetings propagating manufacturing collectivity, dead silence often reigned, and only a few brave individuals aired their opinions, while heated disputes were conducted by peasants in their own environment. From time to time, they boycotted the party reunions during which the aspects of collectivisation were to be discussed, as happened in Kitowo, in the district of Grudziądz. One of the PPR members stated that "[a]s long as the assemblies are held in order to discuss collective farms, no one will attend them." Indeed, out of twenty members of this group, none came to the meeting. Similar cases often took place in other districts, yet it is difficult to estimate how far protests of this type reached. More frequently, people boycotted general village reunions convened by the village council, though in such cases absentees could be fined 500 zlotys. Thus, peasants did participate, albeit unwillingly. At times they sent their wives in order to have peace and quiet. Their disapproval was often expressed by means of applause and whistling. During the assembly of PPR members and non-party inhabitants of Łubiń in the district of Lipno, when the administrative secretary finished delivering his speech on collectivisation, loud cries came from the room: "We do not want collectivisation, we want to work the way we have been doing so far." The rest welcomed those cries with enthusiastic applause.

A similar event happened in Mogilno, yet it was of much broader significance and took place in the very different political context of 1956. The liberalisation following the twentieth assembly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union additionally motivated peasants, and thus they began to demand their rights and compensation for injustices they had suffered. During preparations for the Sixth Congress of the Peasants' Self-Help Association (ZSCh) in June 1956, a meeting of local peasants with the members of the Bydgoszcz Voivodeship, the ZSCh and Congress delegates was held in Mogilno. In all, around one thousand people participated and thus this group can be considered to have been quite representative. The meeting was attended also by a member of parliament, a well-known, pro-Communist activist, Antoni Korzycki. The event was of a highly propagating and political nature, yet it did not produce the expected results, as during the discussion, strong, anti-collectivist moods came to the surface. One of the objectors claimed that individual farming

gave a greater advantage to the state and peasants than did collective farming. Thus, he demanded 'a free hand' for peasants and changes in managerial posts. When a representative of a 'leading collective' started to speak, trying to counter these arguments, "...the peasants who had gathered began to scream and shout – 'no collectivisation'," and did not allow him to finish. This non-parliamentary method of expressing their opinion can be regarded as an expression of the general disapproval in Bydgoszcz to collectivisation.

The attitude of peasants, who decidedly rejected the idea of collectivisation, was frequently discredited and evaluated very severely by various party doctrinaires. Obviously, those evaluations did not match efficiency and justice. One of the participants in KW PPR executive in Bydgoszcz, in September 1948, referred to this case in the following way: "...among peasants, we come across a lack of social identity, egoism, and ignorance; we should first teach them and enlighten them and only then will they listen to us." In this respect, the village hard core party members were also severely criticised by Antoni Kuligowski, the KW PPR first secretary, who blamed them for a lack of preparation and determination in "adjusting the bills of Central Committee to village reality. Chaos and reactive propaganda reign there."

It was not typical of peasants to resort to threats in their discussions with PPR/PZPR, as they knew very well that they could run the risk of arrest at the hands of the UB. The authorities' suspicions were aroused even by insignificant events, such as, for example, the occurrence that took place in Prątnica, in the district of Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, where during the examination of horses someone pointed at a police officer and said: "Look, here comes a collectivist." An investigation was launched immediately, the name of an 'enemy' was established and the case went to the District Court in Grudziądz.

Thus, common sense imposed caution in formulating evaluations and opinions concerning PPR/PZPR policy. Nevertheless, during the hard core meeting in September, Kuligowski warned that in the districts of Grudziądz and Swiecie, the following remarks were common: "As soon as PPR and collectivisation have come, we will hang them all." Events of this type may have happened more often, but they were not recorded in any sources, though one can come across some information that the party hard core were afraid to go out in the evenings.

However, in the source materials there is considerable information about the hostile attitude of peasant members of PPR/PZPR to the idea of manufacturing collectivity. Even certain paradoxical situations arose such as in Kruszyn, a village in the district of Włocławek. Out of 71 members of the local PZPR organisation, only 11 joined manufacturing collectives.

There would be nothing surprising about that, but for the fact that it was they who tried to persuade non-party people not to join collectives and who claimed to have been forced to join them. As one of the participants at the KP PZPR convention in Nowe Miasto Lubawskie stated, the party members from Montowo were "more hostile to collectivity than non-party people." In February 1957, the secretaries of the agrarian PZPR organisations, participants on a six-day preparatory course, warned the organisers at the very beginning that they did not want to hear a word about manufacturing collectives. It would be an unnecessary waste of time. A number of peasant members of the party were expelled on suspicion of anti-collective agitation. After the October breakthrough, no one really knew if they should be rehabilitated, as Leon Wiśniewski explained they had been expelled principally because of actions against collectivisation.

Defending themselves against collectivisation, peasants often referred in their arguments to visions of national properties which were in a pathetic state and could not serve as a model to follow. Later, a similar role was performed by manufacturing collectives, which, instead of attracting peasants, repelled them with their appalling appearance and the state of their finances. In general, one realised that the positive or negative attitude of peasants to collectivisation would depend on the financial situation of collectives and the standard of living of collective farmers. However, reality did not concur with the illusions of those who enforced the programme of the Polish rural collectivisation. Horses dying from famine in the *Iskra* collective in the district of Mogilno, cows perishing in the Dobrzyń collective, pigs starving in the collectives of the Rypin district, and similar cases could not have encouraged peasants to support collective economies. Cattle died from starvation also in PGR's (National Agricultural Farms). While critically evaluating the state of nationalised agriculture in the Bydgoszcz voivodeship, Wincenty Zdziarski, an instructor in the Agriculture Sector of KW PZPR in Bydgoszcz cited a significant detail concerning cows' ability to give milk in the collectives: "We have examined the amount of milk from cows in six collectives and we have determined that on average one cow gives only three litres a day." This fact testified to the lack of basic responsibility on the part of collective barn staff, but also some blame can be put on the managerial staff. Moreover, Zdziarski pointed to a gradual fall in the annual output from one hectare, mainly because of increasing land infertility, its weedy surface, and faults in agro-technical management.

In their arguments against collectivity, peasants referred to many other cases, such as the testimony of repatriators, who did not have the best opinion about Soviet collectives. As obligatory collective farmers, they often had first hand experience of the 'wealth' coming from the

collectivisation of peasants' farms in the eastern regions in the years 1939-1945. At the time, for the local people of Bydgoszcz voivodeship, they became a source of knowledge about collective farms and the Soviet Union in general. In fear of collectivisation, peasants defied even the need for mechanisation of agriculture, as in its own way it somehow destroyed their family farms. Similarly, the peasantry felt distrust towards the idea of a connection between the country and the city and that of working group activity and other groups of the type. Most often they worked in isolation from the rural environment, because peasants did not want even to talk to 'urban' people, including workers. Sometimes, as happened in Jędrówice in the district of Włocławek, when the group came from the town, peasants "shut themselves in their houses" and did not go out to greet them. "After our group had come to the village," said one of the participants in the discussion during a KM PZPR meeting in Włocławek in 1953, "people fled from us." Artistic groups were greeted more warmly, yet as soon as collectives were mentioned, all talks were immediately interrupted.

Rural resistance, as it was optimistically estimated in Włocławek, was allegedly broken down as early as at the end of 1949. As an example, they cited the case of "a very difficult village, Dębice," in the district of Włocławek, where due to the hard work of the group from the local paper mill, the villagers' resistance was suppressed. However, not all groups were able to take pride in such significant 'success'; sometimes they could not 'stalk a peasant', who changed his way of speaking every week. Adjusting themselves to particular conditions, peasants did not take up discussion with strangers and remained silent. There appeared a common attitude of seeming acceptance of everything that was offered by the Polish People's Republic. The peasant "agrees to everything and says that he has never lived a better life in Poland, yet he is reluctant to talk about rural productivity." From time to time, they assured agitators they did not need aid from the state, and they would join collectives when they were unable to cultivate on their own. They cleverly refuted agitators' arguments about the superiority of collectives over individual farming, pointing out that they had already harvested their fields, "while collective fields were still unharvested." Besides, situations arose when members of working groups yielded to peasants' arguments, and instead of convincing them of the necessity of realising their obligations to the state, "our activists joined peasants in complaining about impediments."

One of the defensive tactics that were popular among peasants was that of delay. In winter they promised to join collectives in spring, which they did not do, saying they would do it in autumn.

Facing the inevitability of collective farms, peasants commonly expressed a conviction that all the livestock should be killed and the crops

sold out so that the money earned could be spent on fixed commodities. It was not considered profitable to invest in farms, to buy machines and agricultural equipment because everything was to be nationalised. Some stated openly that it was better to blow everything on alcohol rather than give it to a collective. Not only did peasants sell out livestock and crops, but at the same time they restricted the acreage of cultivated land to 12 hectares. Moreover, there was a common conviction that one should keep only indispensable livestock and little land. Not always, however, did such a tactic protect farmers from being classified within the stratum of collective farmers, because the criteria of classification changed very often; for instance, well-prospering farms started to be classified as collective farms. This time a decisive criterion was the state of livestock. If one owned 20 hectares of land, but only one cow and one pig, then everything was fine; yet if a farmer kept 5 cows and 7 pigs on a five-hectare farm, he was immediately classified as a collective farmer and had his taxes and obligatory deliveries increased. The disorganisation of production on peasants' farms took place on a mass scale, and one did not need to wait long for the results of such a policy. The fact that the elimination of wastes was carried out by prosecution testifies best to the extent of this phenomenon and the helplessness of the agricultural administration. In the Bydgoszcz voivodeship alone, at the end of 1953 and start of 1954 almost 47 hectares of waste were recorded.

Another form of disapproval of collectivisation was assumed by former peasants, who were then collective members. Being under protest, they directed all their professional activity towards farmhouse enclosures and were not much interested in collective farming. Farmhouse enclosures constituted the basis of their existence and could reach a high production level. The lack of interest in collective farming manifested itself in ceasing to go out into the field and in the presence of livestock per single hectare. On numerous collective farms, there were only 3 to 4 cattle which had been bought with national funds. There was also the problem of constant thefts, drinking, and youths escaping to towns.

The hostility of rural Poland towards the idea of collectivisation forced the authorities to abandon the policy of persuasion and to resort to repressive methods. Next to the rapidly cumulating policy of economic destruction of peasants' farms and psychological and moral pressure, a significant role was played by police and administrative repression. At one time, the so-called 'Gryficka case' (1951) made the headlines, which was only the tip of the iceberg, as law and order were commonly broken on a national scale. During the period of turbulent fall in crops (1954), in the Bydgoszcz Voivodeship alone 8000 peasants were imprisoned. Jan Symonik relates how the first secretary of KW PZPR in Bydgoszcz,

Władysław Kruczek ordered the conversion of schools into jails where peasants could be kept. These cases were often referred to during the October breakthrough. Leon Wiśniewski, well-known to us, in a telegram to KC PZPR, wrote on 9 November 1956, "Peasants and manufacturing collective members participating in the discussion regretfully reproached the wrong policy of the party in taking crops in 1952/53, ruining the farms by the auctioning of herds, threatening, putting peasants into prisons, etc. There are a number of comparisons saying that the period of people's power was worse for a peasant than that of occupation or sanacja."

Out of 1300 manufacturing collectives which had come into being in the Bydgoszcz Voivodeship by 1955/56, none was organised voluntarily. They were established "with a gun in hand," and thus under protest and against the will of the future collectivists.