Acta Poloniae Historica
123, 2021
PL ISSN 0001–6829

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DEGREES IN REVOLUTION AND FOR THE REVOLUTION'S SAKE: THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF POLISH COMMUNISTS BEFORE 1939*

Abstract

This paper identifies the most significant patterns of educational experience among members of the interwar Polish communist movement. The first part of the article covers the experiences that communists shared with other representatives of the social strata from which they originated: the reproduction of the social structure or their overcoming of it in the form of social advancement. It also discusses the importance of educational barriers and opportunities as factors facilitating the emergence of attitudes of radical contestation of the socio-political order. The second part identifies educational experiences that were directly related to involvement in an illegal, subversive and repressed political current, and the diverse, sometimes paradoxical consequences of that involvement for representatives of different social strata. It traces the transformations of the communist habitus and proposes the concept of 'clandestine white-collar workers'. The article concludes that there were two patterns in the pursuit of education among the communists: acquiring a degree in revolution or for the sake of the revolution.

Keywords: communism, education, socialisation, habitus, Communist Party of Poland, cultural capital

I

When the Red Army marched into Białystok in the summer of 1920, Hanna Buczek, a local 15-year-old girl, felt happy. Among other things, it meant that this would-be communist activist would be able to

* I would like to thank Izabela Mrzygłód and Kamil Kijek for their valuable comments, and Zachary Mazur for the initial proofreading of this piece.

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/APH.2021.123.08

continue going to school.[1] This autobiographical narrative contrasts sharply with the most common representations in Polish memory and historiography on the Soviet offensive. Moreover, it draws attention to important, yet largely overlooked issues surrounding the relations between power and knowledge in the first half of the twentieth century. My approach in this paper treats education as a category that contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the formative experiences of members of political movements, in this case of the Communist Party of Poland [Komunistyczna Partia Polski, KPP] and its subordinate organisations in the Second Polish Republic.

Examining education from this perspective is a worthwhile exercise for at least three reasons. Firstly, the experiences of the communists provide an angle from which to discuss the significance of educational barriers and promises inherent in the social conditions of the Second Polish Republic for political socialisation into radical dissent and rebellion among representatives of marginalised social strata. A related aspect here is the role of school and university between the wars as a space for entering into and practising politics. Adopting this perspective allows us to look at the education system of the Second Polish Republic not – as is most often the case – as a top-down nation- or state-building agenda legitimising the socio-political order of the time,[2] but rather as a field of negotiations and conflict between young proponents of competing political visions of the future.[3] Secondly, with this

[1] Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereinafter: AAN), Zbiór Relacji Dotyczących Ruchu Robotniczego (hereinafter: ZRDRR), R-90, Hanna Buczek (29 Sep. 1961), 25.

[2] See Anna Landau-Czajka, 'Socjalizacja obywatelska dzieci i młodzieży', in Włodzimierz Mędrzecki and Janusz Żarnowski (eds), *Metamorfozy społeczne*, x: *Społeczeństwo międzywojenne: nowe spojrzenie* (Warszawa, 2015), 137–65; Monika Piotrowska-Marchewa, '"Jacy będą przyszli obywatele?". Dzieci i młodzież Polski międzywojennej w relacjach pamiętnikarskich nauczycielek szkół podstawowych i średnich', in Anna Landau-Czajka and Katarzyna Sierakowska (eds), *Metamorfozy społeczne*, vii: *Procesy socjalizacji w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej 1914–1939. Zbiór studiów* (Warszawa, 2013), 171–89; Hanna Wójcik-Łagan, *Kult bohatera narodowego. Józef Piłsudski w szkolnej edukacji historycznej w latach trzydziestych XX wieku* (Kielce, 2012).

[3] The most systematic, though somewhat superficial, descriptive analysis in this field is: Andrzej Pilch, *Rzeczpospolita Akademicka. Studenci i polityka 1918–1933* (Kraków ,1997); *id.*, *Studencki ruch polityczny w Polsce w latach 1932–1939* (Kraków, 1972). In recent years far more comprehensive perspectives have been proposed by Kamil Kijek and Piotr Franz. See Kamil Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu. Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Wrocław,

paper, I hope to enhance the research into political movements seen not only as vehicles of ideology or programmes in the public sphere but also as spaces of socialisation processes and identity transformations. Many of them offered scope for the pursuit of education – and thus emancipation and social advancement – outside official institutions through active participation in their activities. Despite the antagonistic responses of various political currents to the challenges of the time, they shared a tendency to subordinate every aspect of their participants' everyday lives to formative norms and expectations and to direct their identity dynamics; and a lot of their members willingly accepted this, and even expected them to do so.[4] In respect of the communists, these processes seem particularly intense, because of their illegal and stigmatised status and their radicalism in cutting themselves off from the social order. Therefore questions need to be raised as to the consequences of belonging to this movement – for example, for people of various social backgrounds.

2017); Piotr Franz, 'The Making of Fascists: Warsaw's Private Schools and the Radicalisation of Nationalists in Pre-war Poland', a paper based on the PhD thesis, presented at the 2020 ASEEES Virtual Convention, 7 Nov. 2020. Another important current of research is that focused on ethnic relations and their political consequences for the educational system of Second Polish Republic. See Natalia Aleksiun, 'Studenci z pałkami. Rozruchy antyżydowskie na Uniwersytecie Stefana Batorego w Wilnie', in Kamil Kijek, Artur Markowski, and Konrad Zieliński (eds), *Pogromy Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, ii: *Studia przypadku (do 1939 r.)* (Warszawa, 2019), 327–69; Ewa Bukowska-Marczak, *Przyjaciele, koledzy, wrogowie? Relacje pomiędzy polskimi, żydowskimi i ukraińskimi studentami Uniwersytetu Jana Kazimierza we Lwowie w okresie międzywojennym (1918–1939)* (Warszawa, 2019); Stanisław Mauersberg, *Szkolnictwo powszechne dla mniejszości narodowych w Polsce w latach 1918–1939* (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków, 1968); Monika Natkowska, *Numerus clausus, getto ławkowe, numerus nullus, "paragraf aryjski". Antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931–1939* (Warszawa, 1999); Szymon Rudnicki, 'From *numerus clausus* to *numerus nullus*', *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*, ii, 1987, 246–68.

[4] See e.g. David T. Denver and John M. Bochel, 'The Political Socialisation of Activists in the British Communist Party', *British Journal of Political Science*, iii, 1 (1973), 53–71; Daniel Kupfert Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism* (Princeton–Oxford, 2017); Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu*; Magdalena Kozłowska, *Świetlana przyszłość? Żydowski Związek Młodzieżowy Cukunft wobec wyzwań międzywojennej Polski* (Kraków–Budapeszt, 2016); Xiaohong Xu, 'Belonging Before Believing. Group Ethos and Bloc Recruitment in the Making of Chinese Communism', *American Sociological Review*, lxxviii, 5 (2013), 773–96.

Thirdly, it was the interwar communists who constituted the core of the formation that seized political power in Poland and the wider Central Europe in 1944/5 and thereafter. It is, therefore, necessary to reflect on the various biographical resources with which they entered this new situation. Which of them were rooted in the social background of a given individual, and which in their participation in this political movement? How closely were they intertwined with top-bottom ideological patterns and to what extent with the bottom-up aspirations of the individuals? And how did these resources translate into the practices employed by those individuals in their exercise of power? In respect of these questions, in this paper, I propose a distinction between 'degrees in revolution' and 'degrees for the revolution's sake' as approaches to education that communists could adopt in building the new order and determining their own place within it.

I consider both the objective and subjective dimensions of the educational and political experience: what happened in the course of the individuals' biographies, the way these events and developments appeared to the individuals themselves, and how they interpreted and reconstructed them. This perspective, with its focus on individuals, is what differentiates my approach from most examinations of communism and communists in Polish historiography, which tend to put much more emphasis on the level of institutions and treat individual actors like "dehumanised carriers of events"[5] rather than active subjects experiencing and shaping social reality.[6]

In my analysis of these issues, I use theoretical concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu, such as the categories of 'habitus' – the set of an individual's acquired and established dispositions to think and act – and 'cultural capital' – resources such as education and competencies,

[5] Mariusz Mazur, *Antykomunistycznego podziemia portret zbiorowy 1945–1956* (Warszawa–Lublin, 2019), 18.

[6] This is applicable even to the 'collective portraits' of the post-war party elites studied by Mirosław Szumiło who focused on individuals' 'objective' characteristics and career patterns, and not so much on their mindset or emotions. A rare counterexample is the classic study by Jaff Schatz of Polish-Jewish communists, based on interviews. I leave aside here individual biographical studies, although I should stress that authors of such works present very diverse degrees of readiness to reach beyond the level of events and behaviours. See e.g. Mirosław Szumiło, 'I sekretarze Komitetów Wojewódzkich PPR (1944–1948) – portret zbiorowy', *Dzieje Najnowsze*, xlv, 4 (2013), 43–59; Jaff Schatz, *The Generation. The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland* (Berkeley, 1991).

accumulated by the individual and used as assets in a given field.[7] The use of the 'habitus' category enables the scholar to overcome the dilemma of structure and agency in the analysis. On the one hand, it pays attention to practices perceived by the individual as being available to them, while on the other, it is dynamic and susceptible to modifications. Actors such as the communists may therefore be perceived both as determined by the existing social and political structures, and as making individual choices that influence the shape of these structures.[8] Cultural capital, in turn, serves as a convenient category organising the multiplicity of an individual's efforts and outcomes. I also employ the category of political socialisation as the process by which a specific dimension of the habitus is shaped. Development of the individuals' values, attitudes, norms, or views towards politics plays a key role here; and I assume that these processes are life-long, multilateral, and a function not only of stability, but also of the possibility of social change.[9] My point is that the intensity and density of the socialisation processes within the communist movement resulted in the transformation of the class habitus of its participants as well as the emergence of a specifically communist habitus and subtypes thereof.

I thus understand education as the totality of socialisation experiences that, firstly, determine an individual's place in the social structure, based on their reaching a given stage of the institutionalised school system (level of formal education, *wykształcenie*) and, secondly, shape such dispositions of the individual's habitus in the area of general cognitive and interpretative competencies that are socially identified with that system; these are not acquired exclusively within that system, however.

Educational experience has to be seen as part of a dense mesh of experiences constituting the process of socialisation of the individual. In this article, I will be able to address only some of those experiences. Of most importance to me, of course, are the multifaceted connections

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[7] Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in John Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York, 1986), 241–58; Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *Zaproszenie do socjologii refleksyjnej*, transl. Anna Sawisz (Warszawa, 2001).

[8] Małgorzata Jacyno, 'Mikrostrukturalny aspekt Pierre'a Bourdieu koncepcji habitusu', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, xxxvii, 3 (1993), 17–29; Anna Matuchniak-Krasuska, 'Koncepcja habitusu u Pierre'a Bourdieu', *Hybris*, xxxi (2015), 77–111.

[9] See Barbara Frątczak-Rudnicka, *Socjalizacja polityczna w rodzinie w warunkach kryzysu* (Warszawa, 1990).

between education and political engagement, as well as the barriers to and opportunities for social advancement experienced by representatives of the unprivileged social strata. Ethnicity, however, is a facet to which I refer to only a limited extent, while there are several issues that I cannot claim to problematise systematically at all, including gender issues, territorial dissimilarities, intergenerational tensions within family socialisation, etc. All of these, however, would be indispensable in any more comprehensive research on this subject.

The source base for this article are ego-documents of people involved in the Polish communist movement before the Second World War. An important caveat, however, is that these were produced after 1944/5, and include autobiographies submitted to the cadre departments of the Polish Workers' Party [Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR] / Polish United Workers' Party [Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR] in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as accounts collected by party historians and memoirs published in later decades; I also make use of my own interviews with descendants of the communists (with one exception: an interview with a pre-war female communist herself). Standard questions about such sources need to be raised here. How accurately do they reflect experiences that occurred several decades previously? How were they influenced and filtered by forgetfulness, various strategies of favourable self-presentation, (self-)censorship, or adjustment to models promoted by the official politics of memory of the communist party (such as the image of revolutionaries constantly and enthusiastically 'working on themselves' through self-education). Scholars ought thus naturally to be aware of the tension between the questions of 'what happened' and 'how it was interpreted'.[10] It should be emphasised that there is considerable coherence in the narratives I have researched – both internally and between individual narratives, as well as in relation to other sources on socialisation in the Second Polish Republic. Moreover, education was also an issue somewhat peripheral to the main ideological and political axis of the communist narratives, which were especially susceptible to the abovementioned biases. This leads me to the assumption that these are testimonies with a high degree of credibility. At the same time, all reinterpretation processes are themselves also part of a given experience.

[10] Piotr Filipkowski, *Historia mówiona i wojna. Doświadczenie obozu koncentracyjnego w perspektywie narracji biograficznych* (Wrocław, 2010), 22, 29.

II
REPRODUCTION

The formal education of Polish interwar communists was largely determined by the social composition of the formation of which they were members and by the broader context of educational barriers in the Second Polish Republic. The communist movement was a movement of the popular strata of Polish society: as many as 90 per cent of KPP members may have had working-class or peasant roots.[11] The party's influences among the intelligentsia were weak; moreover, there were also communist ressentiment and negative stereotypes about its representatives as the undisciplined and bleeding-heart individualists.[12]

Although individual social advancement was possible through the accumulation of cultural capital (and there were communists of working-class origin who graduated from universities), the contemporary order nonetheless reproduced inequalities associated with the social structure, with post-primary school and university fees as the main 'objective' factor.[13] In the mid-1930s, only slightly over one per cent of working-class children in Poland reached the final grade of secondary school, and only one in 250 went to university. As for the children of smallholders, less than one-fifth of those who started primary school reached the sixth grade.[14]

Even the singular group that the communists were was not immune from the reproduction of the broader social structure. Among the 800 members of the KPP whose files were examined in the late 1980s, nearly 75 per cent had completed primary school at most, while fewer than 5 per cent had any degree of higher education – and while 60 per

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[11] Zbigniew Szczygielski, *Członkowie KPP 1918–1938 w świetle badań ankietowych* (Warszawa, 1989), 22; Franciszka Świetlikowa, 'Liczebność okręgowych organizacji KPP w latach 1919–1937', *Z Pola Walki*, 4 (1970), 185.

[12] AAN, ZRDRR, R-44, Celina Budzyńska (29 March 1960), 36; Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York–Oxford, 1989), 191; Renata Tulli, 'Przesłanki adaptacji intelektualisty partyjnego do stalinizmu', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, xxxix, 2 (1995), 90.

[13] Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu*, 123–27; Zbigniew Landau and Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Robotnicy przemysłowi w Polsce. Materialne warunki bytu. 1918–1939* (Warszawa, 1971), 389, 392; Janusz Żarnowski, *Struktura społeczna inteligencji w Polsce w latach 1918–1939* (Warszawa, 1964), 163–6.

[14] Marian Falski, *Środowisko społeczne młodzieży a jej wykształcenie* (Warszawa, 1937), 62.

cent of those from the intelligentsia and bourgeoisie at least started a university degree, only 1.5 per cent of those of working-class roots did the same.[15]

A glance at the lives of some working-class and peasant communists reveals just how difficult it could be for them to pursue any type of formal education at all. Stanisław Zawadzki, the son of a farm labourer (later a tram worker), began contributing to the family's budget as a bricklayer's helper at the age of nine. Years later, he would recall to his sons the extreme poverty in which he had grown up.[16] Jan Klecha's father owned ten hectares of land, but after his death, his son was not able to finish elementary school, and later stated that "every pre-harvest was so difficult that we survived by eating bread or potatoes once a day, feeding ourselves with cherries, berries; we went around ragged and shirtless".[17] The First World War was also an experience that changed the early socialisation of an entire generation. Józef Szczęśniak dropped out of school at the age of twelve after his father was deported to Germany for forced labour.[18] It would be no exaggeration to say that these individuals experienced a 'lost childhood' in such cases.[19]

A common thread appears in the memoirs of Jan Trusz, the son of Ukrainian peasants from the Chełm region, and Antoni Piwowarczyk (known after the war as Władysław Wolski), from a Warsaw working-class family. The former began his schooling later than he should have because he did not have the proper clothing; while the latter attended only a few grades since the purchase of the school uniform was beyond the family's financial means.[20]

Subjective attitudes towards reading and learning differed, however. Wiktor Kłosiewicz, who reproduced the status of his bricklayer father, became engaged in a wage dispute with his employer, "not by learning

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[15] Szczygielski, *Członkowie KPP*, 40–7.

[16] Zbigniew Zawadzki, an account for the author (15 and 20 Jan. 2015), recording.

[17] AAN, Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej (hereinafter: KC PZPR), Biuro Spraw Kadrowych (hereinafter: BSK), 237/XXIII-881, Jan Klecha, resumé, [n.d.], 10.

[18] AAN, KC PZPR, Centralna Kartoteka (hereinafter: CK), CK, CKXX/5052, Józef Szczęśniak, resumé (23 Mar. 1945), 4.

[19] See Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu*, 52–3.

[20] Jan Trusz, *Z doświadczeń pokolenia* (Warszawa, 1981), 12; Władysław Wolski, *Kartki kontrowersyjne* (Kraków, 1980), 21.

from any book, but simply by being aware of workers' interests".[21] The Klecha mentioned above declared that "it was poverty that taught me how to look at and understand people. There was a sense of wrong and injustice deep inside me". He was eager to read but had only scraps of newspapers or books he found in the rubbish at his disposal.[22] In the biography of Jan Mitręga, who was the son of a mining electrician, a clear link can be discerned between the individual's own experience (his father's death, the small family pension, growing up during the Great Depression) and political ideology. Excerpts from the works of Marx and Lenin "crystallised the political view in me that only general socialism could free the world from the spectres of war once and for all, and prevent economic crisis, of which I, too, was a victim".[23] As Tony Judt pointed out, Marxism embraced the tradition of bottom-up social radicalism in a new and accessible way.[24] The content of brochures and manifestos appealed to workers and peasants, giving them a sense of empowerment as people who could play an active role in history.[25]

Communists from the popular strata of society often shared the fate of other representatives of these groups. Material conditions were an objective barrier to educational opportunities, regardless of whether individuals expressed a desire for further education or not; they shaped a set of dispositions of the class habitus in which education was beyond the horizon of a given social stratum's possibilities, something that was not even seen in terms of available choice for those who were to remain 'weaker' and 'inferior'. However, in some individuals, these conditions facilitated the emergence of attitudes favouring revolutionary change, shaping a rebellious habitus specific to the early adolescent phase I would call the 'socialisation-to-the-

[21] Wiktor Kłosiewicz, *Gdy wieje wiatr historii* (Warszawa, 1987), 7–8, 14–15.

[22] AAN, KC PZPR, BSK, 237/XXII-881, Jan Klecha, resumé, [n.d.], 10.

[23] AAN, KC PZPR, CK, CKXX/18372, Jan Mitręga, copy of resumé, [n.d.], 3.

[24] Tony Judt and Timothy Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013), 82–5.

[25] Wiktor Marzec, *Rebelia i reakcja. Plebejskie doświadczenie polityczne* (Łódź–Kraków, 2016), 129–35, 154–6. The result of a parallel project, partly based on similar sources, is a book *Rising Subjects: The 1905 Revolution and The Origins of Modern Polish Politics* (Pittsburgh, 2020), reviewed in the 122 *APH*, 310–14; see also Wiktor Marzec and Kamil Piskała, 'Proletariaccy czytelnicy – marksistowskie i socjalistyczne lektury we wczesnej proletariackiej sferze publicznej Królestwa Polskiego', *Sensus Historiae*, xii, 3 (2013), 83–103.

movement', as well as creating solid foundations for its transformation into a revolutionary habitus organised within a particular political framework at the stage of 'socialisation-in-the-movement', starting with access to the communist organisation.[26]

III
SOCIAL ADVANCEMENT

Some communists from unprivileged classes were persistent in pursuing knowledge as cultural capital, which they believed could prove helpful in improving their position in the social structure. The personal files of Antoni Alster, who grew up in a Jewish petty-bourgeois family, suggest that he may not have attended primary school at all. Instead, he studied drafting at night school, and he showed such great talent that his works were accepted for an exhibition of youth art at Warsaw's 'Zachęta' National Gallery. Władysław Góralski, in turn, the son of poverty-stricken farmers, became associated with the People's University founded by Ignacy Solarz.[27]

Social advancement, the accumulation of cultural capital, and transformations of the class habitus were also achieved in more official ways. One example of an individual who made a genuine leap upwards in the social structure was Jan Izydorczyk, the son of farm labourers, who, as the holder of a secondary-school equivalency diploma, found himself among the fewer than 1 per cent of children from a similar background.[28] Significant transformations had taken place in the course of his life. Originating from the most socially handicapped layer of the working class, and becoming aware of the 'class hatred' towards the affluent farmer, who mistreated him,[29] he rejected the fatalistic and subordinate attitude of serfdom that had traditionally been characteristic of members of his stratum.[30]

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[26] A similar distinction between rebels and revolutionaries was also made by Arthur Koestler; *id*., *Arrow in the Blue: An Autobiography*, i: *1905–31* (New York, 1952).

[27] Ignacy Solarz (1891–1940?), activist of the peasants' political movement and organiser of folk secondary schools in Szyce and Gać, based on Danish experiences and the principle of self-governance.

[28] Falski, *Środowisko społeczne*, 62.

[29] AAN, KC PZPR, BSK, 237/XXIII-668, Jan Izydorczyk, resumé (Sept. 1946), 13.

[30] See Józef Chałasiński, *Drogi awansu społecznego robotnika. Studium oparte na autobiografiach robotników* (Warszawa, 1979), 52–7.

Another pattern that should also be mentioned is that of advancement interrupted midway. The authorities of the Warsaw School of Economics [Szkoła Główna Handlowa, SGH] did not agree to meet tradesman's son Jerzy Tepicht halfway by permitting him to follow an individual course of study, for which he had applied in order to be able to provide for himself while a student.[31] Irena Piwowarska (then Szczepaniak), despite the unemployment in her family of Łódź weavers, was accepted into a trade school. However, she had to abandon her course after a year to take up a job as a hosiery worker. In the context of the social conditions that prevailed in the Second Republic of Poland, vocational education should also be perceived as a form of social advancement. After the war, Piwowarska called her biography uninteresting and meaningless, as it was simply "one of hundreds of thousands of biographies of Łódź workers".[32] Indeed, although she was active in the KPP factory organisation, her everyday experience was not significantly different from the 'typical' experience of Łódź proletarians in the 1930s.

IV
SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY AS A SPACE FOR POLITICAL SOCIALISATION

Although education in the Second Polish Republic was more accessible than in previous years, this perceived attainability often awakened aspirations in young people that could not be satisfied in the real world.[33] Thus, a gap between promise and reality emerged, as well as a feeling of relative deprivation that was conducive to involvement in political, social or religious movements.[34] Of crucial importance were both social inequalities and – regarding people of Jewish origin – anti-Semitic practices, such as limitation of access to certain professions that were largely open only to recipients of appropriate education (e.g. the judiciary, state offices, and strategic industries).[35] The education system

[31] Stefan Małecki-Tepicht, account for the author (13 April 2015), transcript.

[32] AAN, KC PZPR, CK, CKXX/4963, Irena Piwowarska, resumé, [n.d.], 29.

[33] Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu*, 151.

[34] See Charles Y. Glock, 'The Role of Deprivation in the Origin and Evolution of Religious Groups', in Robert Lee and Martin Marty (eds), *Religion and Social Conflict* (New York, 1964), 24–36.

[35] On this particular dimension of the anti-Semitism in interwar Poland see Anna Landau-Czajka, *Syn będzie Lech. Asymilacja Żydów w Polsce międzywojennej*

assigned Jews a role as aliens and inferiors.[36] Educated people of Jewish background who had accumulated the cultural capital required to improve their situation encountered barriers solely on account of their perceived difference, regardless of their self-identification. This resulted in the very uncomfortable situation of being suspended between different reference groups, which raised the probability of becoming involved in various subversive movements.[37] Michał Dichter, an engineer from Lwów (who had risen out of working-class poverty), recounted to his family the difficulties faced by educated Jews like him in obtaining jobs in the oil industry.[38] Adam Schaff mentioned that even having grown up in a prosperous Lwów lawyer family and obtaining a thorough education, he felt that specific paths were closed to him, which led him to communism.[39]

The experience of university study in Poland in the 1930s is a separate issue that deserves its own treatment. In that decade, Polish universities became a space for intensified radicalisation and political struggle. In reference to the concept developed by Karl Mannheim, it would be fair to say that within the generation of people born around 1910, communists were one of several generational communities searching for a response to the dramatic challenges of the era, such as the Great Depression and the crisis of faith in the liberal democratic order.[40] The various nationalist groups assumed the dominant and most offensive position at Polish universities. However, even for the incomparably weaker communists organised in Warsaw's Socialist Youth Organisation 'Życie' and its counterparts in other cities, this was a period of increasing influence and burgeoning membership. They seem to have been in greatest evidence in polytechnics, which can be explained by the fascination with Soviet industrialisation, the more acute awareness among young engineers in the training of Poland's

(Warszawa, 2006), 98–101; Landau and Tomaszewski, *Robotnicy przemysłowi*, 119–20.

[36] Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu*, 256.

[37] Marcin Kula, *Narodowe i rewolucyjne* (Londyn–Warszawa, 1991), 191, 203–4; Landau-Czajka, *Syn będzie Lech*, especially 24–5, 53–74, 87–8, 93–107, 131–6.

[38] Wilhelm Dichter, e-mail to the author (22 July 2019).

[39] Adam Schaff, *Pora na spowiedź* (Warszawa, 1993), 22.

[40] Karl Mannheim, 'Problem pokoleń', in Hubert Orłowski (ed.), *Pokolenia albo porządkowanie* historii, transl. Jerzy Kałążny (Poznań, 2015), 110–12.

economic backwardness, and the social composition of technical faculties.[41]

The following strands repeatedly recur in the biographies of 'Życie' members: the semi-legal status of their presence in academic politics, the struggle to defend the interests of poorer students, resistance against the 'ghetto benches' [getto ławkowe] and other anti-Semitic practices, and violence perpetrated by nationalists. Mieczysław Popiel, who came from the *déclassé* nobility, told his sons that the key factors that led him to the KPP were the Great Depression and his opposition to anti-Semitism at the Warsaw University of Technology.[42] Leon Rzendowski (then Leon Łazar), a student at the Warsaw University of Life Sciences [Szkoła Główna Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego, SGGW], where anti-Semitism was extreme even by 1930s Polish standards,[43] was beaten up three times.[44] To paraphrase Padraic Kenney's thesis that every beating in prison is a political lesson, one might say that such lessons were also meted out in lecture halls and university courtyards.[45]

The field of early education was also important socialisation agenda, as shown in the fates of two communists from different social strata in Łódź. Piwowarska, mentioned above, dreamed of becoming a teacher. Nonetheless, the primary school "raised me in the fascist spirit … , in one lesson on Constitutional law I experienced an evolution [of my views]; the teacher wanted to see an amendment to the Constitution because she believed that the dull-witted masses should not have equal voting rights, [a view] which I could not accept".[46] School, despite its aim of safeguarding social stability by tying individuals to the existing order and consolidating the national community, instead taught the young proletarian about the existence

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[41] AAN, Zbiór Akt Osobowych Działaczy Ruchu Robotniczego (hereinafter: ZAODRR), 4739, Mieczysław Popiel, *Wspomnienia z Berezy*, 9; AAN, ZRDRR, R-81, Sergiusz Minorski (3 March 1961), 7, Emilian Walentek (1 March 1961), 144; Sergiusz Minorski, *Czas przed burzą* (Warszawa, 1973), 132; '"Życie", komuna , strajk… Rozmowa z ministrem Januszem Grochulskim', *Politechnik*, 22 (1962), 6.

[42] Jan and Jędrzej Popiel, account for the author, 11 July 2014, transcript.

[43] Ludwik Krzywicki, *Ekscesy antyżydowskie na polskich uczelniach w latach trzydziestych XX w.* (Warszawa, 2009), 21, 38.

[44] AAN, KC PZPR, CK, CKXX/18690, Leon Rzendowski, resumé, 1944, 7.

[45] Padraic Kenney, *Dance in Chains. Political Imprisonment in the Modern World* (New York, 2017), 234.

[46] AAN, KC PZPR, CK, CKXX/4963, Irena Piwowarska, resumé [n.d.], 4.

of unequal classes: Piwowarska perceived the reproductive character of the teachers' seminary recruitment process, which no worker's daughter could wade through, to be part of the 'great class struggle".[47] Within the 'ordinary' working-class habitus, this might be perceived as a manifestation of the natural order; with a transformation into the rebellious habitus, it became something to be overthrown. A decade previously, before Poland had regained its independence, Czesław Bajer, the son of a textile mill manager, found secondary school to be a space of great importance for the development of his leftist views, due both to the anti-Tsarist atmosphere prevalent there and to his own resistance to the 'Jew-devouring' catechist.[48]

V
POLITICAL CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

The 'professional revolutionary' was the model of an ideal communist: a militant combatant fully committed to the cause, prepared to sacrifice literally everything for the party. This was not just a stereotype, even though genuine 'professional revolutionaries', who gave up their previous lives completely, were few compared to the majority of rank-and-file KPP members working in factories or struggling with unemployment. Many communists did indeed strive for union with the movement and renunciation of the self – and these processes were shaped by both top-down pressure and bottom-up desires.[49]

During one conference of the Union of Communist Youth in Poland [Związek Młodzieży Komunistycznej, ZMK] in the 1920s, the group debated whether to exempt young communists from dangerous tasks just before graduation. Some believed that the movement needed

[47] *Ibid*., Irena Piwowarska, resumé, [n.d.], 18–22. Of course this account raises the question of which phase of her political consciousness is reflected here: that during the time she was recalling, or that of the time when she was writing her resumé.

[48] AAN, KC PZPR, CK, CKXX/5825, Czesław Bajer, resumé(15 April 1949), 19.

[49] For one such perspective blending top-down and bottom-up factors that shaped the political practice and mindset of the communist movement see William J. Chase, *Enemies within the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934–1939* (Yale, 2002); Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern. A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London, 1996).

educated people, while others saw it as 'slipping into bourgeois habits' and the first step towards defection.[50] Leon Kasman, a KPP activist, who recalled Solomon Jaszuński, a talented linguist, illustrated this dilemma: "instead of telling him: work on your doctoral dissertation …, they … said to him: listen, you, go to Silesia because the *okręgowiec* [KPP district secretary] has just been busted and there is no one to lead the party there … It did not even occur to him to refuse. He – like all of us – held the conviction that the revolution was far more important".[51] His was not an isolated case: communist students were detailed to party work in the province, while others were simply expelled from their universities following court verdicts or *de facto* had no way back as underground activists in hiding from the police.

My research into communist biographies shows that the reasons for dropping out of education at the university level were chiefly political, while at the secondary or vocational school level, political and economic factors were more evenly distributed. Testimonies to even earlier termination of individuals' education for political reasons are very rare, though it was possible to be expelled from primary school for membership of Pionier, the communist organisation for schoolchildren.[52]

For the most committed revolutionaries, political issues took precedence over everything else. During the Red Army offensive against Warsaw in 1920, some of them were eager to leave high school to work in a factory in order to 'proletarianise' themselves.[53] Antoni Alster deliberately abandoned his artistic work, despite the fact that it was his chief cultural capital – because the Party was all that mattered.[54] Józef Kowalczyk (then Izajasz Sznajder), the son of a musician, did not regret being expelled from his *gymnasium* because he was completely consumed by "social issues and the idea of the international revolution".[55] Others abandoned their previous positivist

[50] Leszek Krzemień, *Kropla w potoku* (Warszawa, 1982), 77.

[51] Teresa Torańska, *Oni* (Warszawa, 2004), 426.

[52] AAN, KC PZPR, CK, CKXX/20088, Maria Knapik, resumé, 1949, 2.

[53] AAN, ZAODRR, 8429, Magdalena Treblińska, account, 1960?, 15.

[54] AAN, Akta Wilhelma Billiga (hereinafter: AWB), 491/42, Wilhelm Billig, *Wspomnienia o Antku*, 13–14.

[55] Józef Kowalczyk, *Z dawnych przeżyć*, photocopy of the memoirs in the author's collection, 8–9.

ideals of serving the people as teachers.[56] Marian Naszkowski, a Polish philologist who had been considering an academic career, would travel around poor Ukrainian villages as a clandestine party functionary. There he began to understand that "human life only makes sense when it is useful, when it is at the service of the society",[57] and his plans for "abstract poring over literature" began to seem 'childish' to him.[58]

At the same time, even if they were arrested, there were activists who ended up with only a temporary suspension of their student status, after which they could return to university and were often able to complete their degree. Their activity in 'Życie' was, in such cases, a climax political experience. One group of brilliant intellectuals masterminded the political work at the Stefan Batory University in Wilno, while at the same time publishing academically influential papers and conducting their own research.[59] During their trial, even the press hostile to the communists referred to them as the academic elite.[60] Dr Kazimierz Petrusewicz, despite his sentence, eluded prison, because he was the only Polish delegate to the international congress of biologists.[61]

Marian Spychalski remained only a rank-and-file member of the academic organisation in Warsaw because he wanted to finish his architecture studies as rapidly as possible.[62] Professional experience was a value in itself to this talented and award-winning urban planner, and contacts within the intelligentsia offered a way of overcoming the isolation of the communist movement.[63] Januariusz Ślusarczyk, a member of the Warsaw University of Technology's 'Życie' cell, was told by his

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[56] AAN, KC PZPR, CK, CKXX/5811, Anna Stock, resumé (23 Oct. 194), 9–10; Maria Kamińska, *Ścieżkami wspomnień* (Warszawa, 1960), 116–18; Marian Naszkowski, *Lata próby* (Warszawa, 1967), 79–84.

[57] Naszkowski, *Lata próby*, 98.

[58] *Id.*, *Niespokojne dni* (Warszawa, 1962), 35.

[59] Anna Jędrychowska, *Zygzakiem i po prostu* (Warszawa, 1965); Jarosław Kurski, 'Wileńska Lewica Akademicka "Front"', online: http://wyborcza.pl/1,75248,138364.html. See also Paweł Libera's article in the same issue of *APH*, 239–60.

[60] 'Proces wileński. Grupa młodego pokolenia przed sądem', *Robotnik* (8 Jan. 1936), 2.

[61] Jędrychowska, *Zygzakiem*, 221.

[62] Marian Spychalski, 'Wspomnienia o partyjnej robocie', *Archiwum Ruchu Robotniczego*, ii (1975), 269.

[63] *Id.*, *Warszawa architekta. Wspomnienia pierwszego powojennego prezydenta stolicy* (Warszawa, 2015), 33, 52.

father, a veteran of the movement, that education is a great value, because specialists would also be very much needed in socialism.[64] And at the same time as the 'professional revolutionary' Jaszuński was killed in the Spanish Civil War, Franciszek Blinowski, previously an activist of 'Życie', was fortunate enough to have a well-paid post and was even considering buying his own car.[65] In 1937, Jerzy Morawski asked to be relieved of his function in 'Życie' because he wanted to devote himself to studying.[66] Interestingly, in 1950 he penned a letter of similar content to the party leadership.[67] In both cases, his educational aspirations may have been bound up with a desire for something akin to internal emigration in the face of the intensity of the Stalinist struggle against the 'enemy within', first during the great purge in the Soviet Union and subordinate sections of the Comintern, and then in the period of 'right-wing nationalist deviation'.

VI
EDUCATION THROUGH POLITICS

The relationship between political involvement and education within the communist movement was even more nuanced. Its adherents often accumulated more significant resources of actual than of institutionalised cultural capital, i.e. more real competencies than school grades completed or type of degree obtained. There were three main channels through which this cultural capital might be accumulated within the movement itself: self-education, political schools in the Soviet Union, and prison.

Young communists from the popular social strata attended lectures delivered by more experienced and better-educated activists, and these were supplemented by further recommended reading.[68] In this context,

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[64] AAN, KC PZPR, BSK, 237/XXIII-290, Januariusz Ślusarczyk, explanation to the resumé, 1952, 15.

[65] Andrzej Blinowski, account given to the author (25 Sept. 2015), notes.

[66] AAN, KC PZPR, CK, CKXX/10206, Jerzy Morawski, resumé (17 March 1949), 15.

[67] *Ibid*., Jerzy Morawski, letter to the Secretariat of Organisational Bureau (5 Nov. 1950), 26–7.

[68] Kamińska, *Ścieżkami wspomnień*, 288–9; Leszek Krzemień, *Związek Młodzieży Komunistycznej w Polsce. Pierwsze dziesięciolecie (1918–1928)* (Warszawa, 1972), 227–30.

let us return to Jan Klecha, who was introduced by a certain communist he met to the writings of Marx and Kautsky.[69] General knowledge was, naturally, closely bound up with the ideological message (which was no different from the secret socialist or independence self-education circles of the Tsarist period): communist peasants who were lectured on colonialism necessarily learned something about Africa, for instance.[70] There were also multilateral conversions of cultural and political capital: a worker might come into contact with communism thanks to university students, and a member of a *gymnasium* self-education circle might be introduced to the ZMK by the proletarians for whom he ran courses.[71]

Another locus where general and political education were interwoven was Comintern schools in the USSR. Selected activists were directed to these from all the countries where the communists were active, in order to become efficient, dedicated cadres of 'professional revolutionaries'. The curriculum of these institutions was primarily political, in the broadest sense of the word, from the pillars of Marxist thought to the use of firearms.[72] However, for students from the plebeian strata, a stay in a Comintern school was usually also their first encounter with anything more than basic education. Stanisław Radkiewicz, the son of a peasant whose primary school education had been interrupted by the First World War, only learned to write correctly at the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West.[73]

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[69] AAN, KC PZPR, BSK, 237/XXII-881, Jan Klecha, resumé, 7 April 1945, 11.

[70] Józef Kogutek, *Gdy byliśmy osaczeni* (Warszawa, 1977), 23–5.

[71] AAN, KC PZPR, BSK, 237/XXIII-425, Antoni Alster, copy of a resumé, [n.d.], 8; AAN, KC PZPR, CK, CKXX/4824, Zygmunt Kratko, resumé, 2 July 1944, 16–17.

[72] See Gidon Cohen and Kevin Morgan, 'Stalin's Sausage Machine. British Students at the International Lenin School, 1926–37', *Twentieth Century British History*, xiii, 4 (2002), 327–55; Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind. Higher Learning among the Bolsheviks, 1918–1929* (Ithaca, 1997), 133–91; Julia Köstenberger, *Kaderschmiede des Stalinismus. Die Internationale Leninschule in Moskau (1926–1938) und die österreichischen Leninschüler und Leninschülerinnen. Die Geschichte der Internationalen Leninschule in Moskau (1926–1938)* (Wien, 2016); Mirosław Szumiło, *Roman Zambrowski. Studium z dziejów elity komunistycznej w Polsce* (Warszawa, 2014), 68–71; Władysław Wicha, 'Wspomnienia', *Archiwum Ruchu Robotniczego*, xi (1988), 418–21.

[73] An anonymous member of Stanisław Radkiewicz's family, account given to the author, 11 Feb. 2015, transcript.

In the post-war party questionnaires there are cases of former students of Comintern schools claiming to have completed higher education, even though they had never attended traditional university or even high school. A certain vanity may have come into play here, but such claims might also reflect the role that those institutions played in the life of those individuals, as well as their genuine internalisation of their authority within the movement.

At the same time, only a small minority of Polish communists visited the Soviet Union before 1939, while the most important platform for educational opportunities in terms of the numbers of individuals who passed through it was the Polish prison system. As had been the case for all political prisoners since the mid-nineteenth century, prisons did not isolate communists from politics; on the contrary, it was simply another space for practising them.[74] In this article, I deal exclusively with the educational dimension of a prison sentence, leaving aside the prison community's ideological, disciplining, and therapeutic functions.

Communists mentioned 'prison universities' in their memoirs and accounts so frequently that this may seem like one more element of the pattern of the official communist politics of memory. We have no quantitative data that could tell us how many communist prisoners actually 'worked on themselves' systematically and enthusiastically. However, we do know that the community authorities actually made sure that a significant part of the daily routine in the cell was devoted to individual and group study of history, geography, mathematics, and languages. For some Jews or Ukrainians, the prison was a space of considerable Polonisation, while for the most socially marginalised, it was a chance to acquire basic literacy skills. This took place in parallel with their ideological formation and diligent readings of Kautsky or Marx.[75] Jan Jamiński, the son of a forest ranger, who had completed only a few grades of primary school, declared that since he was "politically, organisationally, and elementarily illiterate, I devoted all my time to studying".[76] Ignacy Szlajfer's 'teacher' once joked that after the

[74] See Kenney, *Dance in Chains*.

[75] AAN, ZRDRR, R-75, Józef Kofman (2 Nov. 1960), 14; Kłosiewicz, *Gdy wieje*, 24–5.

[76] AAN, KC PZPR, BSK, 237/XXIII-92, Jan Jamiński, letter to the Polish Workers' Party representation in Moscow (21 Jul. 1945), 12.

victory of the revolution, his student would receive a secondary school diploma on the basis of his prison education.[77] And Helena Kamińska (then Frenkiel), who had grown up in poverty as the craftsman's daughter, learned the rules of personal hygiene in her cell.[78]

The roles played by individual communists in these prison education processes differed depending on their cultural capital resources. The better educated generally took on the roles of teachers. One such was Wacława Grudzińska (then Klara Kaufman), a gymnasium student who taught an illiterate Ukrainian woman to read.[79] However, those with a background in the intelligentsia would also spend much time learning foreign languages. Wilhelm Billig, a former student, mentioned that he favoured the political economics study notes written by his fellow prisoners even over post-war textbooks.[80] The relativity of 'higher' and 'lower' education is, in turn, noticeable in the experiences of workers or peasants like Zenon Nowak and Jan Trusz. Despite only having a primary school education, they enjoyed enough authority to teach other prisoners geography. Among other things, Trusz also read a study on folk superstitions.[81] Had they been in the same prison, one of his students might have been Stanisław Kujda, from a working-class family, who asked his prison authorities for a slate so that he could learn to write correctly.

To conclude with the words of Władysław Matwin, who was arrested as a student: "here a lecture, there another lecture, … and the boys came out very swotted-up, obviously".[82] And 'the boys' (and girls, too) were not only studying geography or geometry. They acquired competencies and dispositions that built their habitus as people who might be discussion partners for fellow prisoners of intellectual background and knew 'how to behave'.

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[77] AAN, ZRDRR, R-191, Ignacy Szlajfer (22 Oct. 1965), 26.

[78] AAN, ZRDRR, R-182, Helena Kamińska (31 May 1966), 55.

[79] Wacława Grudzińska, account given to the author (4 Feb. 2015), transcript.

[80] AAN, AWB, 491/24, Wilhelm Billig, Wspomnienia o Antku, 11; AAN, ZRDRR, R-36, Wilhelm Billig (26 Nov. 1956), 9–10.

[81] AAN, ZAODRR, 4226, Leon Podliński, A memoir on comrade Nowak Zenon (22 April 1956), 46; Trusz, *Z doświadczeń*, 66–8, 95.

[82] Władysław Matwin, account for his son, Stanisław Matwin, 1995–2000, transcript in the author's collection.

VII
CLANDESTINE WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS

These examples and reflections can be summed up with more generalised remarks on participation in the interwar communist movement as a downward or upward mobility channel within the social structure. The first of these processes applied to children of intelligentsia or bourgeoisie. For them, involvement in an illegal, repressed, and strongly stigmatised movement was tantamount to renouncing their educational and professional career prospects, or at least stability, and voluntarily placing themselves on the margins of society described by Aleksander Hertz as 'political bohemianism'.[83]

The second phenomenon is less obvious. It may be assumed that communists of peasant, working-class, or more impoverished petty-bourgeois origins who underwent training as 'professional revolutionaries' and gained experience as well as political and general knowledge in Comintern schools and Polish prisons became *de facto* clandestine white-collar workers. Władysław Gomułka recounted this process of transformation of the class habitus in his memoirs, writing: "as time went by …, I distanced myself increasingly from my learned trade of locksmith, while my political qualifications grew, my knowledge expanded, and I was improving in my new profession – that of professional revolutionary".[84] Obviously, this was not a harmonious process; instead, it was associated with the emergence of a habitus full of contradictions, a suspension between different social strata.[85] Neither did the intelligentsia and the plebeians possess equal cultural capital at the end of this process. General knowledge obtained through political experience was often poorly systematised, selective, and filtered through the ideology. Nevertheless, political involvement was a distinguishing factor that set individuals apart from their social background.

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[83] Aleksander Hertz, 'Drużyna wodza', in *id*., *Szkice o totalitaryzmie* (Warszawa, 1994), 196–205.

[84] Władysław Gomułka, *Pamiętniki*, i (Warszawa, 1994), 136. See also Szczygielski, *Członkowie KPP*, 148–53.

[85] See Helene Aarseth, Lynne Layton, and Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen, 'Conflicts in the Habitus: The Emotional Work of Becoming Modern', *The Sociological Review*, lxiv (2016), 148–65; Matuchniak-Krasuska, 'Koncepcja habitusu', 91–2; Marzec, *Rebelia i reakcja*, 207.

VIII
CONCLUSIONS

In their pursuit of education, the majority of Polish communists faced numerous barriers due to their social background, regardless of their personal aspirations and needs. The fate of the average representative of the popular strata of society in the Polish lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was reflected in the standard experience of reproducing the social structure. This also applied to individuals who managed to embark on a path of advancement. Educational barriers were an integral element of social inequality that, intertwined with a complex configuration of other factors, steered some individuals towards a course of radical protest. School was also a forum where one might experience disillusionment and enter a politically active milieu. Education in the form of readings with more political content, in turn, allowed young plebeians to identify links between their personal experience and systemic explanations and solutions.

Acceding to the communist movement had complex, equivocal consequences. On the one hand, the higher they were on the educational ladder, the more frequently communists tended to drop out for political reasons rather than material ones. Abandoning their education, along with other aspects of 'normal' life, turning away from the opportunities ascribed to their origin, from personal aspirations, or from positivist ideals, might also be the personal choice of devoted revolutionaries from higher social strata. In turn, the revolutionary movement gave former plebeians a chance for advancement, modification of their habitus, and transformation into underground white-collar workers. As a result, after the communist seizure of power in Poland in 1944/5, the formation of 'professional revolutionaries' had considerable political capital (long experience in the movement, prison terms, etc.) and highly diverse cultural capital at its disposal. For its representatives, their most important assets were their degrees in revolution.

Such stereotypical 'professional revolutionaries' were the ruling stratum in the movement and served as 'true communist' role models, but, as indicated above, they were very few in number. Therefore, any research into the communist movement must take into account both the processes involved in unifying its members into a disciplined army and their internal diversity and the personal strategies they adopted for finding themselves in the processes of their communist

socialisation. Very little is known about the experience of the hundreds of uneducated and low-ranking communists from factories, workshops, and villages, who, as a group, were poor in terms of both political and cultural capital.

In order to understand pre-war Polish communism, it is also important to reflect on groups such as those of the well-educated student activists in 'Życie' in the 1930s, who, by contrast, had substantial cultural capital, and much more diverse political capital. The experience of studying at Polish universities in the 1930s was a central facet of their political socialisation. They might have been devoted communists, but they were also eager to obtain their degrees, not only in revolution but in chemical engineering or medicine as well – for the revolution's sake.

proofread by Jessica Taylor-Kucia

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