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## POLISH ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY 1945–56: TO STALINISM AND BACK (AN OUTLINE OF SELECTED ASPECTS OF HUMAN–NATURE RELATIONS)

### Abstract

The article focuses primarily on several problems in the broadly understood environmental history of Poland during the Stalinist period. First and foremost, it points to the category of man's attempts to master the environment. This primarily involves plans to transform nature and implement an economic development model based on industrialisation, devised without accounting for its costs. At the opposite end of the scale came attempts to rule over the environment, which brought Poland some devastating climatic anomalies, notably floods and extreme Siberian-type winters. They had a decisive impact on human behavioural strategies, the organisation of everyday life, and even on politics. The final theme of this study examines human–animal relations from the perspective of Polish environmental history during 1945–56. The aim is to illustrate the character of these relations, the oppressive treatment of animals by humans, and the attempts to change existing practices.

**Keywords:** animal history, ecology, Stalinism in Poland, violation of the environment

### I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Polish environmental history is not one of the world's more exhilarating research pursuits. The reasons for this are numerous, not least its lagging development in historiographic methodology on the one hand, and central focus on politics on the other. Preoccupation with nature, animals, climate, ecology, is treated by many a conventional historian as a negligible secondary – if not tertiary – concern, a rose on a rot-heap, if you like, or a 'loony leftie' fad, yet another new-fangled interest of the 'been-and-gone' type.

The toil in cultivating this problem area (which I know from personal experience) requires considerable knowledge of sources, interdisciplinarity, and skill in conducting searches in recondite archival collections usually acquired after many years spent on laborious archival inquiries. Indeed, one must develop competence in tracing studies, press sources, and ego-documents. Here, a strictly specified body of records known to all dealing with 'hard politics' (in the case of post-war Poland, the Politburo, the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, the Cabinet [Urząd Rady Ministrów], certain central offices) is not enough. Complications in research into environmental history are all the greater because it is not really an area of great interest to professional historians as opposed to cultural anthropologists, zoologists, botanists, climatologists, and representatives of like disciplines. They bring an exceptionally valuable fresh perspective on environmental problems, though they must make fairly strenuous efforts to situate their research in its broader historical contexts. This frequently means the need to dig through sources not previously exploited, which typically demand fairly sophisticated critical skills that not all possess.

More than anything, my attempt to take up the challenge of Polish post-war environmental history addresses the issue in its Stalinist aspect. In the narrow formal sense, I take this to cover the 1948–56 period, but it seems to me that its evolution and dynamic cannot be properly understood without reaching back to the immediate post-war years of 1945–48, and the overlap with the gestating de-Stalinisation processes of 1953–56. The choice of this period is not accidental. It was precisely then that various emphatically Stalinist discourses on the environment crystallised in clear ideological fashion. It was then, too, that the powers-that-be sought to implement their ideological visions in a most systematic way. It was precisely those multifarious discourses and elements of reality which made up the basis of their 'productivity', and they constitute this article's keynote reflections.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Discourse, a term deriving from linguistics, is one of the blurriest concepts in social studies and the humanities. Without going into complicated definitions, for this study, *discourse* is treated as a statement or 'text in context', since every message is a cultural text. In a reality created by language and texts, discourse functions as a 'supratext' category that links the world of texts with the world of people in communication with one another. Every message is a cultural text,

The article aims to highlight selected problems through illustrative examples, rather than offer a systematic overview.<sup>2</sup>

Further to these introductory remarks, it seems essential to define environmental history in terms of the elements analysed in this paper. In the footsteps of Małgorzata Praczyk, I treat it as a specific research practice. She writes of the assumption that “environmental history concerns itself with research into the relationship between the natural and human environments, with due regard to the dynamics of these relations and the dynamics of the natural environment itself, or analysis of the culturally constructed vision of nature”.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the characteristic of this type of history is its attitude toward relationality (human vs non-human) and its non-anthropocentric way of looking at the world of humans.<sup>4</sup>

How does the Polish environmental history of 1945–56 fit into these definitional constraints? In answering this question, I propose to concentrate above all on several problems concerning the broadly understood environment in that period, which has become the subject of my own (and sometimes of other researchers’ as well) fairly deep-probing exploration, and give my findings a chance of extending beyond what has been dominated, on the one hand, by analyses of terror and repressions and, on the other, by social resistance to communist rule.<sup>5</sup> The problems for these deepened analyses have been selected with a view to revealing various aspects of relations between man and environment, from attempts to master and transform it that proved harmful to people, up to the point of provoking its overpowering elemental reactions and having to seek defence strategies in propitiation of the angry gods of nature.

How then, specifically, do the themes arise in terms of particular significance, and how do they lend themselves to profitable exploration

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a communication moulded by the reality that frames it. See Tomasz Piekot, *Dyskurs polskich wiadomości prasowych* (Kraków, 2006), 33.

<sup>2</sup> The author is aware that the study omits many key environmental problems that have been exploited in the discourse on this topic (pollution in Upper Silesia, around Nowa Huta, and many others). Instead, an attempt was made to raise new elements of this problem, based on unknown documents.

<sup>3</sup> Małgorzata Praczyk, ‘Historia środowiskowa jako praktyka badawcza’, *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne*, 1 (2020), 352 and 359.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>5</sup> For an attempt at characterising the *acquis* of Polish historiography in the field of environmental history, see *ibid.*, 362–71.

in light of the available sources? First and foremost, I would point to the category of man's attempts to master the environment. This primarily involves plans to transform nature and implement an economic development model based on industrialisation, devised without account being taken of its costs, notably in terms of the resulting water and air pollution and the deteriorating health and hygiene conditions at work.

At the opposite end of the scale came attempts to rule over the environment, which brought Poland devastating climatic anomalies, notably floods and extreme Siberian-type winters, with a decisive impact on human behavioural strategies, the organisation of everyday life, and even politics.

The final theme of this study examines human–animal relations from the perspective of Polish environmental history during 1945–56. The aim is to illustrate the character of these relations, the oppressive treatment of animals by humans, and the attempts to change existing practices. A tentative effort is also made to describe animal reactions to what people were doing to them – in other words, to capture, on the model of Éric Baratay,<sup>6</sup> the animals' point of view, insofar as that was possible.

What are the sources for this study's findings? My interpretations in matters affecting the history of climate, the natural environment, and ecology are circumscribed primarily by my own fragmentary studies,<sup>7</sup> and by the findings of a sparse group of researchers addressing Polish environmental history issues in the years 1945–56. Some relevant conclusions regarding the natural environment in the Stalinist period are contained in a volume of historical studies titled *Ecobiography*

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<sup>6</sup> Éric Baratay, *Le point de vue animal. Une autre version de l'histoire* (Paris, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Dariusz Jarosz, 'Początki zainteresowania władz i społeczeństwa PRL zanieczyszczeniem powietrza', in Tomasz Głowiński and Marek Zawadka (eds), *Od systemu żarowego do ekorozwoju. Ochrona i wykorzystanie zasobów środowiska naturalnego na ziemiach polskich – aspekt historyczny* (Wrocław, 2016), 189–209; id., 'Zanieczyszczenie wód i powietrza w Polsce w latach 1945–1970 jako problem władzy i społeczeństwa', *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały*, 15 (2017), 37–78; id., 'Historia powodzi w Polsce 1945–1989: prolegomena do badań', *Polska 1944/45–1989: Studia i Materiały*, 12 (2014), 71–95; id., 'Pierwsza powojenna "zima stulecia" w Polsce: wybrane konteksty', in Tomasz Głowiński and Elżbieta Kościk (eds), *Od powietrza, głodu, ognia i wojny... Klęski elementarne na przestrzeni wieków*, 215–26; Dariusz Jarosz and Grzegorz Miernik, 'Powódź roku 1947. Z badań nad kontekstami klęsk elementarnych w Polsce po II wojnie światowej', *Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych*, lxxiii (2013), 201–20.

of Kraków.<sup>8</sup> An interesting treatment of Polish post-war environmental history problems is found in Małgorzata Praczyk's work on the settlement of the Regained Lands.<sup>9</sup>

Further period-specific issues which have come under scholarly scrutiny include the Stalinist attempts to transform nature and their reception in Poland. Apart from a very interesting article by Filip Gończyński-Jussis,<sup>10</sup> there is also Beata Wysokińska's contribution to the volume of analytical studies on this problem, not only in Poland, but also in Czechoslovakia, the USSR, and Hungary.<sup>11</sup>

For the pre-mid-1940s period, we have some achievements of Polish historians in contemporary animal studies to boast of,<sup>12</sup> but analyses of their fate in the Polish People's Republic are pretty rare.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ewelina Szpak, 'Uprzemysłowienie – przyrodniczy koniec starego Krakowa?', in: Adam Izdebski and Rafał Szmytkia (eds), *Ekobiografia Krakowa* (Kraków, 2018), 235–44.

<sup>9</sup> Małgorzata Praczyk, *Pamięć środowiskowa we wspomnieniach osadników na „Ziemiach Odzyskanych”* (Poznań, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Filip Gończyński-Jussis, '“Przeobraziciele przyrody”. Motyw kształtowania środowiska naturalnego przez „ludzi radzieckich” i ich polskich naśladowców w propagandzie stalinizmu', *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne*, xlv (2016), 115–33.

<sup>11</sup> Beata Wysokińska, 'The Conspiracy of Silence: the Stalinist Plan for the Transformation of Nature in Poland', in: Doubravka Olšáková (ed.), *In the Name of the Great Work. Stalin's Plan for the Transformation of Nature and Its Impact in Eastern Europe* (New York–Oxford, 2016), 226–89.

<sup>12</sup> Eva Plach, 'Ritual Slaughter and Animal Welfare in Interwar Poland', *East European Jewish Affairs*, xlv, 1 (2015), 3–15; ead., 'Mad Dogs and Animal Protectionists: Rabies in Interwar Poland', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, lv, 3–4 (2013), 391–416; ead., 'Dogs and dog breeding in interwar Poland', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, l, 3–4 (2018), 471–496; Edyta Wolter, 'Działalność Polskiej Ligi Przyjaciół Zwierząt/Polskiej Ligi Ochrony Zwierząt w II Rzeczypospolitej', *Analecta. Studia i Materiały z Dziejów Nauki*, xxvi, 1 (2017), 171–202; Anna Landau-Czajka, *Koty w społeczeństwie II Rzeczypospolitej* (Warszawa, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Among the works embracing the analysed period, it is worth mentioning a study by Gabriela Jarzębowska, 'Retoryka deratyzacji w PRL: od czystki etnicznej i politycznej do czystki gatunkowej', *Teksty Drugie*, ii (2018), 120–37; ead., *Czysta gatunkowa. Tępienie szczurów jako praktyka kulturowa w Polsce powojennej* (Warszawa, 2021). I wrote on the maltreatment of dogs and animals in the Polish People's Republic in the first post-war decade in Dariusz Jarosz, 'The Enemy and the Victim: Stray Dogs in Poland 1945–70 (Discourses and Actions)', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 120 (2019), 113–36; see also id., 'Wielka masakra psów w Polsce gomułkowskiej', *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały*, 17 (2019), 103–33; id., 'Obrazy okrucieństwa: wstęp do badań nad traktowaniem bydła i trzody chlewnej w Polsce Ludowej

Without doubt, the catalogue of environmental studies which have at least touched upon the post-war decade in Poland is broader. But it is worth narrowing the field of research to the problems selected for this study and, at the same time, undertaking deeper analyses based on a variegated catalogue of research sources and perspectives.

## II TO AND FROM STALINIST DISCOURSES ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Before presenting elements of the existing reality which constitute the object of analysis from the vantage point of man-environment relations, the changes in the discourse on this subject should be considered. It seems that their common feature was the transition from a more or less objectified description of reality to Stalinist ideologisation and polarisation. Above all, it concerns the public discourse as reflected in the periodicals of the day. They were, in considerable measure (though not exclusively), expert discourses, since the authors of the given studies were, for the most part, professionals writing in specialist publications. Another characteristic of the discourses of those times (including those emanating from governing circles) was their progressive subjection to circulation restrictions, which reached their apogee in the years 1950–53. Cautious ‘declassification’ in this respect progressed gradually with the onset of the political ‘thaw’.

That was the case with animal welfare or, more precisely, wanton cruelty to dogs and slaughter animals. Documents produced by the powers-that-be seemed to notice that the problem had broader ramifications, for it was no coincidence that in 1948, the minister of public administration issued a recommendation to provincial governors, district governors, and urban and rural mayors in general – and specifically of Warsaw and Łódź – to tighten up “for a certain period of time” (sic!) penalties for people infringing the regulations to intensify the efficacy of combatting overall cruelty to animals (hence not to just those mentioned above).<sup>14</sup>

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na przełomie lat pięćdziesiątych i sześćdziesiątych XX w.’, *Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych*, lxxx (2019), 369–84.

<sup>14</sup> Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (hereinafter: AIPN), file no. 1550/2971, Minister of Public Administration to provincial governors, mayors of Warsaw and

We learn the most about the treatment of animals in Poland up to 1956 from the example of dogs, which were the object of relatively broad-ranging inquiries. In the 1940s, dogs began to be treated as objects of animosity, or at least dislike, in the discourse of authorities and popular journalism. These negative feelings were to have been engendered primarily by roaming stray dogs held to be carriers of numerous diseases, not least rabies, which is fatal to man and animal alike. The carriers of such diseases were forest animals and their intermediaries – mainly wild dogs, cats, and foxes, and down to the final links in the chain – man and his domestic animals. That was the position taken by the authors of texts published in *Łowiec Polski* [The Polish Hunter], the press organ of the Polish Hunters' Association [Polski Związek Łowiecki], and by duly appointed central departmental officials.

In a 1949 issue of the periodical *Pies* [Dog], the press organ of the Polish Kennel Club [Związek Kynologiczny, ZK], a contributor hidden under the initials "Dr I.M". asserted that "Poland has the largest number of rabies cases of all cultured states". This was to stem, among others, from irresponsible approaches to breeding and animal care ("Thousands of stray mongrels roam the villages and suburbs") due to a lack of awareness or dereliction of duties and obligations of dog-owners, who treated their animals like toys (which could be discarded once a child grows up), or due to the dogs being thrown out into the street when they grew old or sick. The author castigated the clandestine trade in stolen dogs, their being kept in unhygienic conditions, and the lack of shelters for homeless animals.<sup>15</sup>

As Stalinisation progressed, there were markedly fewer texts on cruelty to animals. This primarily stemmed from the fact that the authorities had eliminated one 'empathetic' advocate of animal rights, namely the Animal Welfare Society [Towarzystwo Opieki nad Zwierzętami, TOZ] – which was progressively marginalised and finally dissolved in 1951. Publications on attitudes to animals, highlighting human cruelty, became increasingly rare and, if published at all, were written with a characteristically ideological-political bent. This was most clearly embodied by a text published in *Pies* in 1950. Its author

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Łódź, county governors, city presidents, mayors and commune heads, Warsaw, 20 Nov. 1948 r., n.p.

<sup>15</sup> 'Sprawa wścieklizny', *Pies*, 2 (1949), 4.

opened with enumerating the atrocities dogs were made to suffer, which were often the work of young people or children. This batch of facts came with a stab at their interpretation: "The occasional inflow onto the agenda of the authorities of cases exhibiting symptoms of sadism bordering on savagery reveals the horrendous bequest of the era of Nazi rule in our country and the depths of evil the Nazi plague plumbed at times. What's particularly frightening is the intensification of cruelty to animals, which cannot help but arouse serious concern about the health of the majority of our society". A collapsing social order, the author claimed, releases the wildest instincts, leaving in bequest for the new society a return to savagery.

In the capitalist system, an animal was treated as every other privately-owned asset, and the only reflex dictated by bourgeois sentimentality was 'pity' for the animal, which was no more useful than the alms tossed to a beggar. In the capitalist period, the robber economy led to the complete annihilation of particular species, including many humans. The duty of socialist culture is to extend protection to every living being. All acts of violence against animals must be eradicated. Every effort to deracinate all residue of Nazi savagery must be made.<sup>16</sup>

That linkage of cruelty to animals with Nazism was intentionally magnified and served as a convenient theme, because it simultaneously allowed the authorities to duck allegations of such cruelty being part and parcel of the treatment meted out to animals that endured in Polish social groupings, if not Polish culture as such.

The Stalinist discourse on dogs reinforced the tendency present earlier (and later, for that matter) to regard their mass cull as justified by important economic considerations. This rationale extended well beyond the narrow confines of the canine world and found support in the popular journalism of the time, like in *Łowiec Polski*, which in 1952 raised the alarm that:

A serious threat has hung over the wild animals on our hunting grounds. The criminal practice of poaching, which has run riot in various forms throughout the country, threatens our animal stocks with extermination and, to a serious degree, strikes at the raw material base as constituted

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<sup>16</sup> 'Kultura pozostawiona sama sobie, a nie kierowana świadomie... zostawia za sobą pustkowia (z listu K. Marksa do Fr. Engelsa 25 marca 1868 r.)', *Pies*, 1 (1950), 6-7.



by animals living in the wild. At the same time, it already poses a threat in the current season, as plans and obligations regarding the supply of game, pelts, and furs are not being met. By the same token, the criminal poacher or snare setter strikes at our national economy, and thus is its bane, and must be treated as such by the hunting community and the authorities.<sup>17</sup>

In another place, the difficulties in achieving breeding plans and obligations towards the state were reported.<sup>18</sup>

In step with progress in de-Stalinisation, empathy for the fate of animals grew and found its most spectacular expression in the pro-dog campaign inaugurated in 1958.<sup>19</sup>

It is for further research to establish whether the discourse regarding other animals had similar characteristics and dynamics. From what I have managed to establish on this subject, it is known that it was no accident that in the 1940s, the Commander-in-Chief of the Citizens' Militia [Milicja Obywatelska, MO] sought to apply more effective methods in dealing with coachmen who maltreated their horses. It is uncertain whether the discourse continued in this direction in later years. The absence of relevant documents on this topic for the Stalinist period suggests it was abandoned or deeply hidden. The situation was similar with slaughter animals – above all, with cattle and pigs. But back in 1948, there were still local press reports of the cruel treatment of animals at market roundups.<sup>20</sup>

Can a similar schedule of discourse be found in relation to other 'environmental factors'? An answer can be given regarding texts on water and air pollution. Between 1945 and 1949, critical studies appeared in specialist periodicals on the state of the natural environment in Poland and its past and current neglect, with far-reaching negative consequences.<sup>21</sup>

This public discourse on environmental pollution shifted radically around 1950. Smoke-belching chimney stacks became the lyrical symbol of Poland's civilisational leap forward. If water and air pollution

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<sup>17</sup> 'Kłusownictwo – szkodnictwem gospodarczym', *Łowiec Polski*, 11 (1952).

<sup>18</sup> 'W dniu 1 maja', *Łowiec Polski*, 5 (1953), 70.

<sup>19</sup> Jarosz, 'Wielka masakra psów'.

<sup>20</sup> Jotwał, 'O czworonogach i dwunożnych okrutnikach', *Życie Radomskie*, 3 July 1948.

<sup>21</sup> See, among others, Bronisław Rudziński, 'Zagadnienie dobrej wody jako warunek dobrego zdrowia', *Gaz, Woda i Technika Sanitarna*, xx, 1 (1946), 20–1.

were criticised, it was depicted as the bequest of the capitalist robber economy.<sup>22</sup>

The discourse of the authorities on this topic during this period was restricted to a narrow group of state institutions.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes it was internationalised: every now and then, the diplomatic services of Poland and its neighbouring states (primarily of Czechoslovakia) informed each other about industrial plant sewage pumped into their border rivers.<sup>24</sup>

In this period, the protection of waters was the object of interest of various organisations. Documents on exceptionally harmful chemical contaminations were circulated only in the highest echelons of power. However, it bears repeating that the Stalinist discourse on environmental pollution, notably air pollution,<sup>25</sup> was classified and restricted to a narrow circle of party and state authorities.

This situation began to change markedly in the de-Stalinisation period. Research results showing the catastrophic state of Poland's polluted rivers and smoke-ridden towns were being published ever more frequently in specialist periodicals.<sup>26</sup> It was then that such publications began to carry genuine polemics on how to address environmental pollution, given the limited resources allocated to its protection.<sup>27</sup> The problems of environmental pollution and its consequences became a topic of the thaw-time popular journalism. For

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<sup>22</sup> Adolf Joszt, 'Ochrona rzek', *Gaz, Woda i Technika Sanitarna*, 1 (1952), 21–4.

<sup>23</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereinafter: AAN), Państwowa Komisja Planowania Gospodarczego (hereinafter: PKPG), file no. 6661, Report of the Secretary of the Interprovincial Committee for River Protection in Katowice for the year 1951, n.p.

<sup>24</sup> See AAN, PKPG, file no. 6305, CSR Embassy in Warsaw to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [1951], n.p.; AAN, PKPG, file non. 6305, Translation of a note from the Czechoslovak Embassy in Warsaw to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs [1952], n.p.

<sup>25</sup> AAN, Sejm Ustawodawczy (hereinafter: SU), file no. 288, Minutes of the joint meeting of the Health and Labour and Social Welfare Committees on 11 Jan. 1949, 124–33; AAN, PKPG, file no. 1852, Praesidium of the National Council of Łódź, Municipal Economic Planning Commission to the PKPG, addressed to Minister Dr Stefan Jędrzychowski, Łódź, 20 Dec. 1950, n.p.

<sup>26</sup> See Stanisław Bontemps, 'W sprawie zanieczyszczeń wód', *Gospodarka rybna*, ii (1955), 6–8; Franciszek Chrzanowski, 'Zanieczyszczenie wód śródlądowych województwa gdańskiego', *Gospodarka rybna*, 7 (1956), 7–8.

<sup>27</sup> See, among others, Włodzimierz Skoraszewski, 'Rzeki czy ścieki?', *Gaz, Woda i Technika Sanitarna*, 11 (1956), 405–6.

example, echoes of an article on the dramatic work conditions in the Celwiskoza Plant in Jelenia Góra, where chemical vapours discharged in the course of production processes induced mental illnesses in its workers, reverberated resonantly throughout the locality.<sup>28</sup> More strident critical tones began to be struck in reports on groundwater contamination from industrial and rural sewage, the problem of the lack of sewage treatment plants or their faulty functioning.<sup>29</sup>

Ecological questions were becoming increasingly important in the discourse of the authorities, with discussion of how to address these issues in legal and organisational terms.

Without doubt, the Polish contribution to the Stalinist plan of transforming nature was an environmental question subjected to particularly strong ideologisation and politicisation. The discourse on this topic commenced in 1948, because it was then that the plan was unveiled in the USSR. As conclusively established by Filip Gończyński-Jussis,<sup>30</sup> Soviet solutions were propagated in Poland above all else. The great efforts to grow more productive plants, to modify animal organs, to divert river courses and irrigate deserts, were all logged with great enthusiasm. It was stressed that in socialist countries, those efforts served ‘the benefit of the people’ as opposed to imperialist strivings outside the Eastern Bloc.

Popular journalism sought to accentuate the mass character of the nature-transforming movement. Its ‘patron saints’ were pseudo-scientists and self-taught charlatans like Trofim Lysenko and Ivan Michurin, who were glorified in the propaganda of the time. The popular discourse on this topic was broad-based and optimistic in tone. Was it accompanied by an equally enthusiastic expert and scientific discourse? In light of Beata Wysokińska’s research findings, great caution should be exercised, at least regarding Poland.<sup>31</sup> It is known that ideas for transforming nature based on the Soviet model were well and truly buried in the period of de-Stalinisation, and the young biologist Leszek Kuźnicki gave symbolic testimony to this process

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<sup>28</sup> Elżbieta Szpitalak, Józef Łukaszewicz, ‘Celwiskoza’, *Słowo Polskie*, 132 (1956).

<sup>29</sup> Jerzy Ziętek, ‘Zieleń i woda dla mieszkańców śląskich miast’, *Trybuna Ludu*, 219 (1954); Tadeusz Keller, ‘Problem zlej wody’, *Tygodnik Demokratyczny*, 49 (1955), 7; Tadeusz Borowy, ‘Nasze kłopoty z wodą i ściekami’, *Życie Warszawy*, 83 (1956).

<sup>30</sup> Gończyński-Jussis, ‘Przeobraziciele przyrody’, 128–31.

<sup>31</sup> Wysokińska, ‘The Conspiracy of Silence’, 277.

in his article ‘Darwinizm i lysenkizm’ [Darwinism and Lysenkoism], published in the influential opinion-forming weekly *Po Prostu* in December 1955. In 1956, Lysenkoism was dropped from Polish science.<sup>32</sup>

We know relatively less about the public discourse on natural disasters. Its drift, as exemplified by the cold snaps of 1946/1947 and the floods of 1947, was politically loaded: serious allegations that Polish Peasant Party [Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL] members, hostile to the communist regime, were cashing in on the misfortunes of flood victims, were contrasted with the spirited public behaviour of members of the Polish Workers’ Party [Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR] heroically and selflessly saving the afflicted.<sup>33</sup> In actuality, the Peasant Party’s newspaper *Gazeta Ludowa* concentrated on painting an objective picture of life in the flooded areas.<sup>34</sup>

With these findings, aimed at establishing the chief characteristics of discourses in which select environmental problems arose, it is worth considering how they manifested themselves and what course was taken in the aspects of human–natural environment relations discussed in this study.

## II

### MAN AND ENVIRONMENT IN POLAND: THE HARSH REALITY

#### PRESUMPTION PUNISHED: VIOLATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND ITS COSTS

Convictions inherent in the discourse on nature, that it is an ‘anti-modernisation’ force<sup>35</sup> which should be mastered, found expression in concrete initiatives. Without doubt, the most radical idea of man’s rule over the environment, which appeared in Poland in 1948–56, was the plan to transform nature, modelled on Soviet concepts, and several flagship enterprises were set to operate in its framework.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Nowy Dwór – miasto pod wodą. Co ma powódź do polityki’, *Głos Ludu*, 86 (1947).

<sup>34</sup> ‘Wisła zmieniła koryto. 40 wsi pod wodą, 20 tysięcy ludzi bez dachu. Od specjalnego wysłannika Gazety Ludowej’, *Gazeta Ludowa*, 83 (1947); ‘Powódź w czasie mrozów. Groźne wylewy Warty i Noteci’, *Gazeta Ludowa*, 13 (1947).

<sup>35</sup> Gabriela Jarzębowska, *Czysta gatunkowa. Tępienie szczerów jako praktyka kulturowa w Polsce powojennej* (Warszawa, 2021), 301.

One of the most ambitious projects in this vein was the Oder–Danube canal. The idea itself became an object of deliberation back in 1947 (by a team of Polish and Czechoslovakian experts), but it only matured after aligning with the chain of enterprises conceived on the Stalinist model. In the end, the disagreements between the parties to the project (financial issues) proved insurmountable. Despite attempts to revive the idea on Romanian initiative in 1956 and conferences devoted to the project held in 1957 and 1958, all attempts to progress beyond the preliminary studies stage proved unsuccessful.<sup>36</sup>

Construction work on the Wieprz–Krzna canal project (launched in 1952) proved much more advanced. Its implementation was the object of interest and action by the cabinet, Central Committee management circles, and the Institute for Land Reclamation and Grassland Farming [Instytut Melioracji i Użytków Zielonych, IMiUZ]. Further to recommendations laid down by the Party's second plenary convention, the IMiUZ set about conducting a preliminary survey of the canal's purlieu and evaluating it in agricultural-economic terms.<sup>37</sup> Despite vesting these operations with high priority status, it turned out that the plan's implementation (completed in 1961) would harm the natural environment of Polesie Lubelskie.<sup>38</sup> The idea of an east–west waterway linking the Upper Silesian Industrial Region with Ukraine, which necessitated regulating the River Bug (a corresponding resolution was adopted by the cabinet on 15 September 1951), was to remain on paper – in plans or preliminary project works.<sup>39</sup>

The weakness in implementing nature-transforming ideas is also evident in the reception of projects focused on cultivating plants. In Poland, an attempt was made to grow rice (at the experimental level) – in the State Institute of Scientific Rural Economy [Państwowy

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<sup>36</sup> AAN, Ministerstwo Żeglugi i Gospodarki Wodnej (hereinafter: MŻiGW), file no. 102, Memo on the Odra–Danube Canal [1960], 7–8.

<sup>37</sup> AAN, Ministerstwo Rolnictwa – Biuro do spraw Instytutów Rolniczych Naukowo-Badawczych (hereinafter: BdsIRN-B), file no. 530, Report on the Institute's activities for the year 1954, n.p.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Report on the activities of the Institute for Land Reclamation and Grassland Farming for the year 1954, n.p.

<sup>39</sup> Dariusz Jarosz, 'Regarding the Reception of the Stalinist Plan for the Transformation of Nature in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland', *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, cxxv, 2 (2018), 143–55.

Instytut Naukowy Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego, PINGW].<sup>40</sup> Starting from 1951, scientists tried to acclimatise cotton (at five Breeding-Research Stations of the Institute of Plant Breeding and Acclimatisation [Instytut Hodowli i Aklimatyzacji Roślin, IHiAR]).<sup>41</sup> At the time, the IHiAR also conducted research into growing varieties of corn and new types of cold-resilient cereals, as well as acclimatising fibrous (velvetleaf, yucca, kenaf) and gummiferous plants.<sup>42</sup> Attempts were also made to introduce Lysenko and Michurin's methods at the Institute of Horticulture in Skierniewice, which in 1952 organised a two-day First National Michurinist-Horticulturalist Convention, attended by about 50 guests.<sup>43</sup> During this period, the Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation [Instytut Uprawy Nawożenia i Gleboznawstwa, IUNG] conducted research on the Williams method for controlling grass and on corn cultivation. The IUNG also established cooperation with 30 Michurinist farmers on issues such as the acclimatisation of corn, sorghum, and other rare plants.<sup>44</sup> The United Soviet Bloc countries were also searching for a solution to the threat posed by the Colorado potato beetle.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, some of the measures in this respect (growing cotton, increasing cultivation of flax and hemp) were imposed across all Comecon member states.<sup>46</sup>

In the prevailing conditions of the time, the implementation of the Polish version of the nature transformation plan brought fairly

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<sup>40</sup> AAN, BdsIRN-B, file no. 542, PINGW report for 1950, appendix, n.p.

<sup>41</sup> AAN, Urząd Rady Ministrów (hereinafter: URM), file no. 5/1354, Justification for the resolution on cotton acclimatisation, 32; AAN, BdsIRN-B, file no. 525, Annual report on the scientific and research activities of the Department of Special, Industrial and Fibre Plants of the Institute of Plant Breeding and Acclimatisation for the year 1952, n.p.

<sup>42</sup> AAN, BdsIRN, file no. 525, Annual report on the scientific and research activities of the Institute of Plant Breeding and Acclimatisation for the year 1952, n.p.; *ibid.*, Annual report on the scientific and research activities of the Cereal Crops Department of the Institute of Plant Breeding and Acclimatisation for the year 1952, n.p.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Report on the scientific research and service activities of the Institute of Horticulture for the year 1952, n.p.

<sup>44</sup> AAN, BdsIRN, file no. 542, Report on the activities of the Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation in 1952, n.p.

<sup>45</sup> AAN, Ministerstwo Rolnictwa (hereinafter: MR), file no. 516, Resolution of the 5th International Plant Protection Conference, Berlin, 2–14 Dec. 1952, n.p.

<sup>46</sup> Wysokińska, 'The Conspiracy of Silence', 152.

miserable results. What had a far greater devastating effect on the environment were changes to the project caused by the adopted model of imitative modernisation, whose constitutive feature was the intensively forced-paced industrialisation.

These problems had already become the subject of research in the mid-1940s, and it was impossible to deny knowledge of them later. For example, in 1946, a specialist memorandum asserted that polluted water caused illnesses among many people weakened by malnutrition during the war. The author of an article on this topic noted that towns were receiving milk diluted with water contaminated with contagious germs. Such milk was becoming the source of dangerous infections, especially for babies. Additionally, nearly 40% of the milk at that time came from consumptive cows.<sup>47</sup>

An inquiry into documents produced by institutions and offices in the Stalinist era shows that environmental pollution was acknowledged but not prioritised in official action plans.<sup>48</sup> The Ministry of Agriculture's records hold a memorandum from the Supreme Board of the Polish Angling Association [Polski Związek Wędkarski, PZW] addressed to the State Economic Planning Commission [Państwowa Komisja Planowania Gospodarczego, PKPG], with a schedule of forty-eight such cases of contaminated waters used by the Association in various regions under its supervision in the years 1951–2. It should be of particular interest, if only because the value of poisoned fish was roughly estimated at three million zlotys.<sup>49</sup>

A highly contentious controversy during the de-Stalinisation period, centred on the devastating effects of environmental pollution on human health, involved artificial silk factories. At a joint sitting of the Health, Work, and Social Care parliamentary commissions on 11 January 1949, the members acquainted themselves with expert opinions on the

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<sup>47</sup> Rudziński, 'Zagadnienie dobrej wody', 20–1; on tuberculosis in cattle in postwar Poland, see Jarosław Sobolewski, *Gruźlica bydła w Polsce w świetle poglądów dotyczących rozwoju choroby i jej zwalczania w latach 1882–1975* (Toruń, 2020), 99–103.

<sup>48</sup> The author is aware that the environmental problems mentioned above were a challenge not only for communist Poland but also for many other countries around the world, including Western Europe. This text is only an introduction to broader and more interdisciplinary research, which, in the case of Poland between 1945 and 1989, is still very scarce. The presented text partially fills this gap.

<sup>49</sup> AAN, MR, file no. 129a, Polish Angling Association to the State Economic Planning Commission, Warsaw, 3 Sep. 1953 (confidential), n.p.

problem of carbon disulphide poisonings at artificial silk factories. State Hygiene Office's research revealed that carbon disulphide was attacking the workers' nervous systems, which gave symptoms such as loss of strength, fatigue, weakness of the lower limbs impeding one's ability to walk, peripheral nerve sensory disturbances, tingling, coldness of the limbs, degenerative changes in the grey matter of the brain, damage to the cornea, inflammation lasting several days, memory loss, insomnia in tandem with a tendency to fall asleep at work. Acute poisoning caused repeated attacks of rage, anaemia, testicular changes with loss of libido in men, and in women, infertility and low sex drive, disturbed menstrual cycles, and frequent miscarriages.<sup>50</sup>

Information on research carried out in artificial silk factories in Łódź and Tomaszów Mazowiecki, as kept in the PKPG records, indicates that contamination affected not just the plants themselves, but also their immediate surroundings.<sup>51</sup> Irena Kęsy's research into air pollution in the vicinity of artificial silk factories in the two mentioned towns reveals considerable fluctuations in the levels of carbon disulfide concentration. In the immediate surroundings of the factories, it frequently exceeded the levels regarded as acceptable for work plants in the USSR. At a distance of a hundred metres from the factories, its concentration levels seemed below the norm. Haemoglobin levels among the textile workers in the nearby artificial silk factories themselves were lower than among those working further away from them. In both towns, the populations complained of various ailments associated with the effects of carbon disulfide (headaches, nausea, loss of appetite, insomnia). These complaints typically arose during periods when easterly winds carried carbon disulphide vapours. The situation was all the more complicated because, in Kęsy's opinion, at the time, there were no known methods of cleansing the air of this substance. Given these circumstances, she recommended siting artificial silk factories in sub-mountainous regions with prevailing winds, at a distance of at least 2 kilometres from human settlements.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> AAN, SU, file no. 288, Minutes of the joint meeting of the Health and Labour and Social Welfare Committees on 11 Jan. 1949, 124–33.

<sup>51</sup> AAN, PKPG, file non. 1852, Presidium of the National Council of Łódź, Municipal Economic Planning Commission to the PKPG, addressed to Minister Dr Stefan Jędrzychowski, Łódź, 20 Dec. 1950, n.p.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Irena Kęsy, Air pollution with carbon disulphide in the vicinity of artificial silk factories [1950] (confidential), n.p.



The Oder was a particularly polluted river at the time, as determined by the Extraordinary Commission for the Regained Lands [Nadzwyczajna Komisja Ziem Odzyskanych] of the Sejm, which operated from 1957–61. From the studies produced for the Commission's purposes, it would arise that "[t]he Oder's tributaries are completely polluted by industry. The Oder, which with low water levels loses its self-cleansing capacity, has become the main sewage retention tank". In 1954/55, the ammonia concentration level in the river reached 9 mg/l (ten times the norm). The pollution indicators in 1955 were seven times higher than in 1946.<sup>53</sup>

The incidence of river and atmospheric pollution in Poland in 1945–56 was due to the imposed industrial development methods. Were ordinary people aware of this fact? Did they try to rebel against this?

The population noticed the problem with increasing frequency, showing, at the very least, concern, if not outright despair. Here is what Euzebiusz Walter, a correspondent of *Trybuna Wolności*, had to say in a letter of 16 December 1955 addressed to the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party [KC PZPR], containing a shocking description of the fate of female workers in the match factory in Sianów, Koszalin District: "Zofia Kossak [Kozak?] is a model worker. ... She's been working at the phosphorous machine without respite for the past seven years. Her work conditions are hard, her earnings good, and here's what caused phosphorous poisoning in this first-rate worker's sinews, [and] she is dying. Despite that, no health protection measures for workers have been introduced at this plant. Only when one loses her life ..., the next victim will be difficult to find, because that's what a female worker anticipates when put on the phosphorous machine at this plant".<sup>54</sup>

It is difficult to speak of the existence of ecological movements or the expression of public opinion. It seems, however, that early signs of thinking in terms of danger and fear for the condition of the

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<sup>53</sup> AAN, Kancelaria Sejmu (hereinafter: KS), file no. 179, Minutes of the 12th NKZZ meeting on 14 March 1958, 150–1v. See also: AAN, MZiGW, file no. 165, Report from the away session of the Sejm committees in Wrocław on the development of the Oder River, [14 March 1958], 151–8.

<sup>54</sup> AAN, Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej (hereinafter: KC PZPR), Warsaw, file no. 237/XXV-17, *Biuletyn*, no. 4/115, 8 Jan. 1956.

environment were germinating. It was no accident that already in 1954, one Genowefa B. from Kraków wrote in a letter to the Polish Radio:

What's been going on with (our) water for some time now? Why is it so bad and stinky? It must be America, those provocateurs are poisoning it so as to exterminate us, just as they sent us those Colorado potato beetles to starve us. There is no other explanation. But what to do, why doesn't our state do something to save people? I drank some of this water here once and violently vomited as a result.<sup>55</sup>

This quote reflects how the awareness of threats to the environment and its degradation blended with the anti-American propaganda of the period. Ordinary people were coming to see themselves as victims of a poisoned environment, which they saw as the work of other people.

#### NATURE'S SUPREMACY OVER MAN

In man's relations with the natural environment in Poland of 1945–56, the environment turned out to dictate the conditions and define the *modus vivendi* of millions of people. Such was the case with natural disasters: great floods, big cold snaps, droughts. These phenomena, never encountered previously, had begun occurring in Poland still before the Polish variant of Stalinism took shape. The winter cold snaps of 1946/1947 were something unheard of due to their reach and the scale of difficulties they caused.

The first post-war 'winter of the century' (there was more than one) began at the end of 1946. As stated elsewhere, a substantial cold wave

[A]lready came in early November and held fast until mid-March 1947 ... It's not just Poland that is hit by cold snaps and heavy snowfall. The problem needs further research, but Polish press reports already point to the gravity of the situation. In January and February 1947, alarm was already raised that all road and river transport had been suspended in the British occupation zone in Germany due to the roads being covered by sheets of ice. In München-Gladbach, the police used firearms to disperse a crowd looting a coal train and the local gasworks. Two hundred and fifty arrests were made. In Baden-Württemberg, factories had been shut from 10 February

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<sup>55</sup> Archiwum Ośrodka Dokumentacji i Zbiorów Programowych TVP SA (hereinafter: Archive of the TVP SA), Warsaw, Letters Office, file no. 1050/9, *Biuletyn*, 23 March 1954, n.p.

due to lack of coal and restricted power supplies. Due to the extreme cold, Bucharest was deprived of meat and bread for several days. The Black Sea froze over some eight miles out. In Hamburg, during ten days of an extreme cold snap, life came to a standstill. At the beginning of January, scores of deaths were recorded due to the cold in various places in Germany. On 10 January, *Gazeta Ludowa* reported that for several days, an ice floe was coming down the Danube, posing a threat to bridges in Vienna. Due to the low temperatures, Romania was cut off from the rest of the world, except Sofia and Istanbul. In Bucharest, the temperatures dropped to minus 28 degrees Celsius. Schools were kept shut in Rome, and energy supplies were rationed in Czechoslovakia. ... At the beginning of January, severe cold and snowfall hit the USA. Rail and road services virtually stopped, and there were no flights in or out of New York's LaGuardia Airport for many days. In February, snow and temperatures below zero even hit Florida. In Great Britain, 'passenger only' rail services were introduced; ships had problems in transporting coal due to the cold. Many places were cut off from the world.<sup>56</sup>

In Poland, the cold waves exacerbated the already serious economic difficulties. Over and above anything else, they affected agriculture.

The bitter winter in which periods of heavy snowfall intermingled in some regions with its lack, had catastrophic effects on winter crops. A negative effect was also exerted on vegetation by acute spring frosts and a lack of humidity due to the drought that followed. According to estimates of Central Statistical Office's agricultural correspondents, 44 per cent of wheat sowings, 22 per cent of rye, 62 per cent of rapeseed, and 39 per cent of clover, were all blighted by the cold. Part of the winter crop sowings had to be ploughed up. The provinces that suffered most were Lublin, Rzeszów, Olsztyn, Szczecin, and Warsaw ones. The reports of provincial governors for the 1947 winter period corroborated those findings. They also wrote that still in 1946, due to early frosts and labour force shortages, potatoes and beetroots had partially wasted away in the fields. Winter cold snaps also caused great wastage in mound potatoes which in the Gdańsk province alone came to an estimated 30 per cent. Difficult climatic conditions also caused delays in spring sowings. Moreover, flooding necessitated repeat sowings in some areas. For that reason, cereal harvests in 1947 were fairly poor.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Dariusz Jarosz, 'Społeczeństwo, system władzy a problemy z klimatem (1945–1956)', in Dariusz Jarosz, *Rzeczy, ludzie, zjawiska. Studia z historii społecznej stalinizmu w Polsce* (Warszawa, 2017), 40–1.

<sup>57</sup> Jarosz, 'Społeczeństwo', 41.

From the economic point of view, probably the only positive effect of the bitter winter in agriculture was the fact that a large proportion of the field mice population froze to death. If we are to believe the Central Planning Office [Centralny Urząd Planowania, CUP] report on the economic situation in March 1947, their number subsequently fell to about 25 per cent of the 1946 figure. Despite that, the plague of mice in 1946 still affected the difficult food supply situation during the 1947 preharvest period. In March, yet another threat was identified – the first Colorado potato beetle colonies.<sup>58</sup> Big cold waves immobilised Baltic ports and shipping.<sup>59</sup> Shipping difficulties spelt serious complications for industrial plants, whose productivity depended on imported raw materials. The CUP economic reports for February and March 1947 indicate that the textile industry faced the most significant problems due to the suspension of sea deliveries of cotton and jute. The acute shortage of these raw materials led to production stoppages at several textile factories in Częstochowa.<sup>60</sup> The press also informed that in mid-February, two shiploads of artificial fertilisers from England were icebound.<sup>61</sup> Deliveries of horses by sea from the USA were also suspended.<sup>62</sup> Coal freighters could not set sail from Polish ports to take advantage of the favourable market situation.<sup>63</sup> The icebound Baltic Sea kept fishermen on land; trawlers and other fishing vessels were immobilised in smaller ports, leaving the home market stripped bare of fresh fish.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, the low temperatures engendered telecommunications problems, with telephone and telegraph networks not working

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<sup>58</sup> AAN, Centralny Urząd Planowania (hereinafter: CUP), file no. 390, Report on the economic situation in Poland, March 1947, 62–65; See also Józef Parnas, 'Sprawa doniosła i pilna. Walka z chorobami zwierząt i szkodnikami roślin', *Głos Ludu*, 58 (1947).

<sup>59</sup> 'Port gdański znowu czynny. "Jermak" otwiera ruch w porcie', *Dziennik Bałtycki*, 78 (1947).

<sup>60</sup> AAN, CUP, file no. 390, Report on the economic situation in Poland, March 1947, 61–62; *ibid.*, Report on the economic situation in Poland, February 1947, 43.

<sup>61</sup> 'Okrety uwięzły w lodach', *Trybuna Robotnicza*, 46 (1947).

<sup>62</sup> AAN, Ministerstwo Ziem Odzyskanych (hereinafter: MZO), file no. 185 (mf. B-5289), Status report of the Olsztyn Province Governor for February 1947, 6.

<sup>63</sup> M., 'Z morzem nie ma żartów', *Gazeta Ludowa*, 42 (1947).

<sup>64</sup> 'Kutry rybackie w okowach lodowych', *Dziennik Bałtycki*, 9 (1947); 'Rybołówstwo morskie unieruchomione przez lody i mrozy', *Dziennik Bałtycki*, 44 (1947).

properly.<sup>65</sup> How did people react to this attack of extremely disruptive weather conditions? What form did defence take against such a cruel and heartless environment?

Above all, administrative regulations were introduced to combat the steep price hikes that resulted from the severe winter. The increase in prices on basic consumer goods came at a galloping rate: 1 kg of bread cost PLN 70 in Warsaw in the third week of May, while a fortnight earlier it had cost PLN 32. With icebound seaports, fish prices shot up. To reduce price hikes, those in power left specific quantities of cereals and flour from abroad to the tender mercies of the free market, and in March, they made purchases within the framework of the so-called Supply Fund.<sup>66</sup> Difficulties in household coal supplies were noted.

In March 1947, food and fuel shortages led to a rise in strike rates.<sup>67</sup> Offices and schools were kept shut due to a lack of fuel; difficulties cropped up in running hospitals, sanatoria, preventoria, and healing houses.<sup>68</sup>

The pervasive cold led to higher flu rates. CUP records for January 1947 reveal that an estimated 20 per cent of the country's workforce had gone down with the flu.<sup>69</sup> Public transport, both rail and road, was down to offering skeleton services.<sup>70</sup> The actions of the authorities

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<sup>65</sup> Report on the activities of the Post and Telegraph Department for the month of March 1947 (AAN, Ministerstwo Poczt i Telegrafów, file no. 66, 152) recorded that the programme of works on linear equipment was reduced due to adverse atmospheric conditions and management of the flood emergency service.

<sup>66</sup> AAN, CUP, file no. 390, Report on the economic situation in Poland, March 1947, 71; *ibid.*, Report on the economic situation in Poland, February 1947, 40; *ibid.*, Report on the economic situation in Poland, April 1947, 90–92; *ibid.*, Report on the economic situation in Poland, May 1947, 123; AAN, MZO, file no. 93, mf. B-5297, Monthly situation report of the Poznań Province Governor for March 1947, 139; AAN, MZO, file no. 186, mf. B-5290, Situation report by the Governor of Olsztyn for March 1947, 7; AAN, Ministerstwo Administracji Publicznej (hereinafter: MAP), file no. 54, mf. B-745, Situation report by the Gdańsk Province Governor for January 1947, 26.

<sup>67</sup> *Biuletyny Ministerstwa Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego 1947*, i (Warszawa, 1993), 38.

<sup>68</sup> AAN, MAP, file no. 115, mf. B-806, Report on the activities of the Poznań Provincial Office for the period from 1 Jan. 1947 to 31 March 1947, 59; 'Zakopane bez opału', *Robotnik*, 34 (1947).

<sup>69</sup> AAN, CUP, file non. 390, Report on the economic situation in Poland, January 1947, 1–2.

<sup>70</sup> "900 minut opóźnienia". Na dworcach i torach podstołecznych', *Życie Warszawy*, 42 (1947). On the difficulties of rail travel for writers in this period,

at the time were restricted to ad hoc responses to cold-induced crises. Was that all?

It would seem that the exploitation of extreme weather conditions was instrumentalised politically. It should be noted that on 19 January 1947, thus in the middle of ‘the winter of the century’ in Poland, the infamous falsified parliamentary elections were held. What significance can be attached to the extreme cold for their course? To be sure, the harsh weather conditions were cited by authorities seeking to deter their political opponents from participating in the elections. In what way? Keeping people endorsing the lists of Polish Peasant Party (PSL) parliamentary candidates out in the cold, with no protective cover, was one way to induce them to withdraw their signatures. Such instances were described by Stefan Korboński in his memoirs. Keeping those candidates under arrest by the Security Office [Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, UB], in unheated cells or other premises, frequently at temperatures below zero degrees Celsius, with feet in cold water for many days at a stretch, was a torture device designed to induce them to desist from seeking parliamentary mandates.<sup>71</sup> Finally, PSL sympathisers had to cover more than 10 kilometres to reach their polling stations, while supporters of the regime’s Democratic Bloc, voting openly, had transport organised for them. Moreover, the former had to wait in long queues for the possibility to cast their votes, even though the supporters of the Bloc voted without having

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see M. Dąbrowska, *Dzienniki 1944–1965 w 13 tomach*, vol 5: 1942–1947 (Warszawa, 2009), 206–7.

<sup>71</sup> Michał Skoczylas, *Wybory do Sejmu Ustawodawczego z 19 stycznia 1947 r. w świetle skarg ludności* (Warszawa, 2003), 63, 68; Stefan Korboński (*W imieniu Kremla* [Warszawa, 1997], 222) describes a case of peasants from the Lviv region resettled in Lower Silesia who withdrew their signatures from the list of PSL candidates when *bezpieka* [a colloquial name for the Security Office] agents arrived and “rounded up the women and children of the whole village in one yard and declared that they would keep them there until the men withdraw their signatures. They stood there all night, shivering with cold, because everybody stubbornly refused to yield...” Only when dawn began to break and the *bezpieka* didn’t allow anyone to fetch food and water, and it looked as if the children could waste away in the cold, the peasants gave way and signed declarations edited by the *bezpieka*. Before the elections, however, a delegate of these peasants reached Korboński with a declaration asserting that “they withdrew the declarations given to the *bezpieka* since they had been forced out of them, and they reaffirmed the validity of their initial signatures...”.

to wait.<sup>72</sup> Given the difficult atmospheric conditions, both the process of reaching the polling stations and the act of voting were encumbered by additional obstacles. In this way, the intensely cold weather became a weapon put to some effect in the ongoing political struggle.

This was not something that occurred just in 1947. Keeping peasants in winter in unheated MO prison cells and other premises was a standard method for inducing them to sign declarations of accession to production cooperatives in the Stalinist period.<sup>73</sup>

The climate dictated the conditions of life both during the great flood, which descended on Poland in 1947 and was primarily the result of climatic anomalies, and due to neglect in clearing the major debris left behind after the war. Riverbeds were awash with huge amounts of military equipment, elements of demolished bridges, and various metal bits and pieces, large and small – everything that impeded the free flow of waters and stopped snow, and was thus conducive to the formation of ice floes.<sup>74</sup>

It was estimated that damage to embankments and blockages caused the flooding of about 350 settlements, of which 76 villages in the district of Sochaczew and 26 in the district of Warsaw were destroyed entirely. The flood affected about 150,000 people; 1,310 lost all their possessions in the Sochaczew district alone, and 8,400 in the Warsaw district. Great damage was also registered in the Poznań province (the districts of Turek, Koło, and Konin, with about 100 flooded areas). According to erstwhile unequivocal estimates, about 46,000–52,000 hectares of arable land and 50,000–73,000 hectares of meadows and pastureland were flooded. Moreover, close to 2,000 heads of livestock inventory drowned.<sup>75</sup> The flood did not spare towns:

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<sup>72</sup> Jan Hebda, *Trzy przykłady manipulacji wyborczych z rejonu Tarnowa*, in Michał Wenkлар (ed.), *Koniec jałtańskich złudzeń. Sfałszowane wybory – 19 I 1947* (Kraków, 2007), 188; Korboński, *W imieniu Kremla*, 229; Stanisław Wójcik, *Wybory 1947* [underground publication], 25.

<sup>73</sup> Dariusz Jarosz, *Polityka władz komunistycznych w Polsce w latach 1948–1956 a chłopci* (Warszawa, 1998), 76.

<sup>74</sup> Jarosz and Miernik, 'Powódź roku 1947', 201.

<sup>75</sup> AAN, CUP, file no. 390, Report on the economic situation in Poland, March, 60; '25 mostów drogowych i 5 kolejowych zniszczyły wezbrane wody. Wywiad z wicem. Żaruk-Michalskim', *Życie Warszawy*, 94 (1947); AAN, Ministerstwo Pracy i Opieki Społecznej (hereinafter: MPiOS), file non. 271, Report on the effects of the spring flood of 1947 and relief efforts as of 17 Apr. 1947, 77–80; AAN, Kancelaria

the whole of Nowy Dwór and Koło, as well as parts of Konin and Poznań, were submerged.<sup>76</sup>

The most tragic information, however, came from the Oder valley. A breach in the embankments in Kietz, Brandenburg, on the German side of the river (before the Second World War, it was a district of Kostrzyn nad Odrą), caused a massive, violent inundation. On the one hand, it protected areas on the Polish side of the river from being flooded, but on the other, it was a tragedy for the German town, resulting in the drowning of over 280 people.<sup>77</sup> The data available (most certainly not comprehensive) suggests that the number of fatalities in the flood ranged from 65 to 75. This was more than what was then regarded as the most tragic flood in twentieth-century Poland, which occurred in 1934 and claimed 55 victims.<sup>78</sup>

In this situation, the actions of man amounted merely to mitigating the most painful effects of this 'cruel climate'. A *Gazeta Ludowa* report from flooded areas in Sochaczew of 23 March informed that people had been taken by surprise by the flood and barely managed to save their lives by climbing to the highest points in their homes, because the water nearly reached the roofs:

Among the population under siege by water in the villages of the municipality of Głusk, scenes straight out of Dante's *Inferno* are playing out. People are going mad with terror and fear about the fate of their nearest and dearest, from whom they had been separated by water, and about whom they know not whether they are alive. The first days of the flood were filled with resounding cries of drowning cattle trying to save themselves. Amid the din, people were seen from an aeroplane headed to the Kampinos Forest. Not all made it. [In Wyszogród] floating dead bodies were seen.<sup>79</sup>

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Cywilna Prezydenta RP i Kancelaria Rady Państwa, file no. 301, Minutes of the third plenary session of the Warsaw Province Regional National Council on 10 May 1947 in the ZZK Hall in Pruszków, n.p.

<sup>76</sup> 'Dramatyczna walka z szalejącym żywiołem', *Dziennik Wola Ludu*, 72 (1947); '1.300 km nad Wisłą, Wartą i Odrą. Szczecin jeszcze w okowach lodu', *Życie Warszawy*, 87 (1947).

<sup>77</sup> AAN, MZO, file no. 211, mf. B-5315, Situation report by the Szczecin Province Governor for May 1947, 7; 'Wody Odry załazy niemieckie miasteczko', *Dziennik Bałtycki*, 83 (1947).

<sup>78</sup> *Zarys monografii powodzi w Polsce w 40-lecie Głównego Komitetu Przeciwpowodziowego* (Warszawa, 1988), 11.

<sup>79</sup> 'Dantejskie sceny na terenach powodziowych. 8 tysięcy ludzi na dachach domów', *Gazeta Ludowa*, 81 (1947).



At the time, journalists struck a note of solidarity with domestic animals, an instinctive reaction to save them. One report spoke of how the Wilanówka, so far a lazily flowing river, flooded all the households in the village of Zawady. The local population rallied to save birds and pigs, sheltering them in their attics, but “they failed with cows”.<sup>80</sup> The visible attachment to one’s immediate surroundings, as well as fear of looters, is evident in this quote. The wish to remain in one’s natural habitat prompted flood victims to react with reluctance to the idea of resettlement to the Olsztyn and Gdańsk provinces despite pressure from the authorities. According to data from the Ministry of Work and Social Care, in 1947, they managed to relocate 714 families from the Warsaw and Sochaczew districts.<sup>81</sup>

No such large floods were recorded in 1948–56, but those that were generated elicited similar reactions from both flood victims and flood-fighting services. This was the case in 1954, when it was discovered that only nine villages could be evacuated. Moreover, in order to counteract blockages, icebreakers were dispatched.

However, it is difficult to resist the impression that the ‘supremacy of the environment’, which revealed itself with such implacable force, had a decisive impact on mass behaviour, engendering significant changes in the human world.

### III CONCLUSIONS

Even this potted, imperfect analysis shows that significant changes occurred in the man-environment relationship in Poland between 1945 and 1956. Human agency came up against environmental factors, which, in turn, impinged and sometimes directly dictated human response strategies.

Research into discourses on selected aspects of the environment in the years 1945–56 clearly shows that transformations crept in gradually. Depending on the period (immediately post-war, the apogee of Stalinism, de-Stalinisation), the approach to environmental protection or animal rights issues, and, not least, the attempts to

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<sup>80</sup> ‘Potężny napór wody na wały wiślane. Wilanówka zalała Zawady. Pod Kazuniem fala powodzi rozszerza się’, *Życie Warszawy*, 82 (1947).

<sup>81</sup> AAN, MPiOS, file no. 263, *Opieka społeczna 1944–1947* (Warszawa), 83.

master nature, was variegated. The character of the discourse (public, covert, journalistic) of the authorities and its expressions began to syncopate with the rhythm of the ongoing political and ideological transformations.

Analyses of select problems of Polish environmental history between 1945 and 1956 bear witness to the people's co-existence with poisoned rivers and polluted air as the price to be paid for accepting specified priorities in economic development, accompanied by attempts (tempered as they may have been by the discreet resistance of decision-makers) at radical interference in the course of nature. Elementary defeats in this regard were probably the most spectacular examples of nature's (environment's) supremacy over man. And man-animal relations in this period revealed man's capacity for inordinate cruelty to his fellow creatures on this earth.

It was only Gomułka's Poland (1956–70) that tried anew, in a less confrontational way, to 'settle' man's relations with the environment. However, the benefits of this initiative fell far short of revelatory.

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