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Transition of Polish countryside in the years 1918–1989

Summary: In the pre-war period problems of the Polish countryside were fragmentation and overpopulation. In spite of the land reform, the farms were mainly smaller than 5 hectares and the peasants practiced the extensive farming. Only some bigger farms, mainly in Western and Middle Poland, were modern. The Great Depression led to agricultural goods prices drop by 66%, which lasted until 1945. The Polish countryside during World War II suffered enormous material and demographic losses. After the end of the war the radical land reform was introduced, which deepened agricultural fragmentation. Some part of the land remained in the government's possession and was transformed into State Agricultural Farm (Pl. *Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne*, PGR) The area taken up by those farms was extended systematically, particularly in the western and northern parts of Poland. In 1948 the government started to collectivize the countryside. Farmers were forced with restraint and repression to join the cooperative farms. After 1956 most cooperative farms fell apart and the policy became less strict, e.g. by reducing compulsory deliveries. The deepening depression of the 1970s led to the drop in prices and the collapse in the agricultural industry, which caused the breakdown of food supply. The bad condition of agriculture lasted until the last days of the People's Republic of Poland.

Keywords: rural history, State Agricultural Farm (Pl. PGR), economic history

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In the 20th century history of the Polish countryside, there were significantly more dark times than the periods of economic and political prosperity. The interwar period did not bring resolution to the most important problems connected with the agrarian structure and overpopulation. The ensuing war and occupation only increased the poverty and economic deprivation of the village areas, and after WWII, wrong policies led to a stagnation in agriculture and decreased the quality of life of the citizens. At the same time, the countryside and its inhabitants bore most of the burden of industrialisation, while the gap between the Polish and western European agriculture gradually increased. Meanwhile, the modernisation of the rural areas occurred significantly more slowly in comparison with the Western European countryside, which had a negative impact on the quality of life of their inhabitants.

1. 1918–1939

Number and diversity of the rural population.

In the interwar period, the rural population comprised 73% of all Polish citizens (according to the census of 1931).¹ The major, although fairly diverse, group were the peasants (table no. 1). Agriculture was also a source of income for other groups, such as landed gentry and workers hired in the manor estates belonging to the nobility. Only a fraction of the people living in the villages had jobs not connected with agriculture (e.g. teachers, public officers, craftsmen).

¹ In the interwar period, the population increased by 18.5%. M. Mieszczankowski, *Struktura agrarna Polski międzywojennej*, Warszawa 1960, p. 310.

Table 1. Estimated rural population divided into social classes (given in millions)

Social group	English equivalent	1921	1931	1938
Total population of Poland	–	27.2	32.1	34.1
Chłopi ogółem	Peasants in total	14.2	16.4	17.4
Półproletariat	Poor peasants without land	1.2	1.6	1.8
Małorolni	Smallholders	5.9	6.8	7.3
Średniorolni	Well-to-do smallholder	5.3	6.2	6.4
Grupa „kmieca” w tym „wielkokmieca”	Well-to-do farmers with land	1.8	1.8	1.9
		0.3	0.3	0.3

Source: J. Żarnowski, *Spółeczeństwo II Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa 1973, tab. 28.

At that time, one of the major problems of the countryside was overpopulation. In the second half of the 1930s, for 100 ha of arable land, meadows and pastures, there were 81 people, while in Germany – 49.2, Czechoslovakia – 64, and Denmark only 36. Meanwhile, the crop yields in those countries were higher than in Poland.² Similarly, to other issues, there were some regional differences, as illustrated by table no. 2.

Table 2. Village dwellers employed and unemployed per 100 ha of arable land

Year	Poland – total	Voivodeships			
		central	eastern	western	southern
1921	71.2	72.5	52.3	57.0	102.4
1931	76.5	77.9	60.6	54.1	108.4
1938	81.5	83.2	65.0	58.1	114.9

Source: M. Mieszczankowski, *Rolnictwo II Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa 1983, p. 52.

² M. Mieszczankowski, *Struktura agrarna Polski*, p. 54. According to some authors, the overpopulation was even higher reaching as many as 300 people per 100 of arable land in the southern voivodeships; I. Ihnatowicz, A. Mączak, B. Zientara, J. Żarnowski, *Spółeczeństwo polskie od X do XX wieku*, Warszawa 1988, p. 623.

The problem was difficult to tackle, as the weak industry was unable to absorb the excess of workforce from the country. The overpopulation was only partially alleviated by emigration. It is estimated that in 1926–1928 0.5 m village inhabitants left for work. The real numbers, however, could be significantly higher.³

Agrarian structure

Another problem influencing the Polish agriculture was an unfavourable agrarian structure. Tiny family farms of 2 ha and smallholdings dominated the landscape, comprising 61.6% of all farms, while the extensive farms and estates exceeding 50 ha accounted for less than 1%, covering more than 48% of all arable land (20% of land was in the estates 1000 ha or bigger). The greatest number of large farms were in the Eastern Borderlands (Pl. *Kresy Wschodnie*), Greater Poland, Pomerania, and Silesia.⁴ Such a division of land suggests that over half of the farms were too small to sustain a family. At the same time, the excess of workforce in the countryside could be observed.

The data above do not illustrate the regional differences resulting from the historical conditions, in particular different policies of the occupying countries towards the rural areas. In the western voivodeships, the large peasant farms were dominant because only those were able to oppose the Prussian policy aiming to eradicate the Polish ownership. Modern farming methods were implemented, machines and fertilisers used, and there was a market demand for the produce. Conversely, in the former Russian partition, there was significant land fragmentation caused by a frequent land division. As a result, the majority constituted small commercial farms, extensively cultivating their land. The market was also highly competitive, as it was flooded with the goods imported from inland Russia. The southern voivodeships (former Galicia) were known for their even greater

³ M. Mieszczankowski, *Struktura agrarna Polski*, p. 311.

⁴ Ibidem, pp. 337–338; Słabek H., *Dzieje polskiej reformy rolnej 1944–1948*, Warszawa 1972, pp. 20–23; J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski w XX wieku*, Warszawa 2003, p. 64.

fragmentation and overpopulation. Their efficiency was also influenced by the arable land check boarding (Pl. *szachownica gruntów*). The census of 1921 shows that 46.8% of farms comprised of three separate plots of arable land.⁵ Thus, land consolidation was in order and by the end of the interwar period 60% of scattered land (especially in the central and southern voivodeships) were consolidated.⁶

Table 3. Land ownership in Poland according to census of 1921⁷

Land ownership in Poland in 1921				
Number of farms	Number		Area	
	Farms [in thousands]	Percentage	Farms [in thousands]	percentage
Total	3 490.7	100.0	37 926.0	100.0
od 0 do 2	1 013.4	29.0	1 060.7	2.8
od 2 do 5	1 138.5	32.6	4 248.3	11.2
od 5 do 10	861.1	24.7	6 562.6	17.3
od 10 do 20	360.0	10.3	5 201.7	13.7
od 20 do 50	87.6	2.5	2 611.1	6.9
over 50	30.1	0.9	18 241.6	48.1

Source: Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Gospodarka Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa 1991, p. 10.

⁵ 27% of which had land in four or more places. In extreme cases, such fragmentation could reach as many as a few hundred. The lands belonging to one farm could be located not necessarily in one village but also in those surrounding it. The greatest fragmentation could be observed in Podlachia. I. Bukraba-Rylska, *Socjologia wsi polskiej*, Warszawa 2008, pp. 196–197.

⁶ J. Skodlarski, *Zarys historii gospodarczej Polski*, Warszawa 2007, p. 250; J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 146. Land consolidation faced greatest obstacles in Galicia, where the farmers were attached to traditional field arrangement. In western voivodeships consolidation was unnecessary – it was conducted in only a few villages. I. Bukraba-Rylska, *Socjologia wsi polskiej*, p. 197.

⁷ Census of 1921 did not include c.a. 16% of the total area – the Vilnius voivodeship and Upper Silesia. M. Mieszczankowski, *Struktura agrarna Polski*, p. 18.

Land reforms in the Second Polish Republic

Most of political parties saw the need for changing the unfavourable agrarian structure and that is why, as early as 1919, the Parliament introduced a bill on the division of state land into smaller plots and repurchase of the excess private lands. The maximum farm area was established at the level of 180 ha, and 400 ha in the case of the Easter Borderlands. The bill did not come into force due to the political frictions. A more radical variant of the reform was passed by the Parliament in July 1920 in the wake of a dramatic situation on the Polish-Soviet war frontlines. The bill on the agrarian reform implementation passed at that time involved a compulsory buyout of the excess land in the private farms (over 60 ha in the industrial areas, over 400 ha in the former Prussian partitions and eastern reaches, and over 180 in the rest of the country).⁸ Expropriated farmers were to receive damages of 50% of the average price of land, which sparked numerous protests among the community of landowners and the National Democracy Party.

After the March Constitution of 1921 had come into effect introducing the rule of protection of personal property, the implementation of the reform faced serious obstacles. In practice, land subdivision was restricted to the state-owned lands. The issue of the reform was again raised in 1925, when the bill then passed enforced yearly subdivision of 200 thousand ha (for the 10 consecutive years). The upper limit of a farm acreage was established at 60 to 180 ha in central Poland, 300 ha in the eastern voivodeships, and 700 for industrialised farms (i.e. ones with some food processing plant within the premises). The damages for the owners corresponded to the market value of land and buyers could seek preferential credits to pay their dues.⁹

The land reform was enforced with various effects (with great deceleration in the time of the crisis) until the end of the interwar period. It resulted in a decrease in the size of the larger estates and subdivision of the area of 2.6 m ha.¹⁰ It did not, however, solve the problem of hunger in the

⁸ J. Skodlarski, *Zarys historii gospodarczej Polski*, p. 250.

⁹ J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 64.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 146.

countryside, neither did it stop the advancing agrarian fragmentation. True, the land coming from the divided estates enlarged the existing farms, but the tradition of dividing land between offspring ultimately resulted in the continuous decrease of the average farm area. While in 1921 the average area was 5.7 ha, in 1938 it fell to 5.0 ha. At the end of the 1930s, the number of tiny, not self-sufficient farms accounted for 64.5%.¹¹

The reform had other than strictly economic repercussions. The authorities attempted to strengthen the Polish presence in the Eastern Borderlands and Greater Poland and Pomerania.¹² In the lands of the former Prussian partition, where the majority of the estates was in the hands of Germans, until 1931, their number fell from 36.2% to 19.2% in Greater Poland and from 43.7% to 22.3% in Pomerania. In the Eastern Borderlands, military settlement operation was underway. By 1922, 6.6 thousand soldiers' families had been settled along with 16 thousand families of the civilian settlers.¹³ Both groups had their problems. It was difficult to start farming, due to lack of farming tools and machines as well as livestock, but above all, in this new, ethnically foreign surrounding, Polish settlers were treated as intruders and often encountered hostility being directly attacked, which only exacerbated the conflicts with the locals.

Farming conditions

Particular groups of village dwellers differed in terms of lifestyle and financial status. The standard of life was highest in the former Prussian partition, and lowest in the Eastern Borderlands. The situation of particular families

¹¹ I. Kostrowicka, Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Historia gospodarcza Polski XIX i XX wieku*, Warszawa 1984, p. 363.

¹² In Silesia region, all the large estates were in the hands of the Germans, however in 1937, due to the Geneva convention it was impossible to implement any ownership changes there.

¹³ The supply of land allotted to the soldiers came from the Russian farms taken over by The Land Resources of the State (Pl. *Państwowy Zasób Ziemi*), the lands of the nobility, church lands, as well as abandoned estates. The soldiers were settled there first. The volunteers, veterans, and those considered particularly merited were granted the land free of charge.

mostly depended on the size of the farm, soil quality, prices of produce, and farmers' skills. In the 1920s, the civilizational gap between different parts of the country gradually decreased.¹⁴ The biggest growth of production took place in the Eastern voivodeships. In Greater Poland and Pomerania, where high-yielding commercial farms dominated, there was a visible regress stemming from the shrinking domestic market.

In the first years after the war, lack of food was ubiquitous, which eventually led to high prices. The farmers had to, first, supply the compulsory quotas (until 1921), and only the remaining produce could be put on the market. With gradual growth in food production, the prices of produce fell; in 1922, crops failed and in the wake of soaring inflation, the government artificially maintained low prices not to affect negatively the standard of living in the cities. Those factors also negatively impacted the economic condition of the village, even though the inflation also resulted in a decrease in the value of money, making the debts and overdue taxes easier to pay back.

The prices of agricultural products rose again in the second half of the 1920s. Owing to the changes in production and good weather conditions, the living conditions in the countryside improved as well. Farmers devoted part of their income to enlarging their farms by buying the subdivided land. The countryside's modernisation was not, however, far reaching. Civilizational backwardness of the village rendered the Great Depression particularly acute. The prices of produce plummeted. In 1935, the wheat cost 34% and rye 32% of the prices in 1928. The prices of other types of produce fell similarly. To earn enough to cover the due taxes, debt, or purchase of other consumer goods, farmers had to sell three times as much produce as before. The possibilities to increase the farm's production were limited, because of lack of fertilisers and machinery. As a result, they were forced to reduce the families' consumption to put more produce for sale.

¹⁴ One of the key indicators of the changes was eradication of illiteracy among the village dwellers. According to the data from the census of 1921, 28.1 % of the villagers could not read and write. Thanks to the activities undertaken by the state, especially compulsory primary school education, the percentage fell to 31% in 1931. The highest number of illiterate people were in eastern voivodeships. Cf. W. Mędrzecki, *Chłopi*, in: *Spółeczeństwo polskie w XX wieku*, ed. J. Żarnowski, Warszawa 2003, p. 131.

The increase in the supply of agricultural commodities led to further fall in prices. The negative relation between the prices of food and other consumer goods only aggravated the situation, resulting in the so-called price scissors. Consequently, the farmers resigned from purchasing most of the consumer goods. How much they lacked shoes and clothing is shown by the fact that some children, having nothing to wear, ceased going to school. Even matches were replaced with flint and tinder (a symbol of poverty at that time was dividing one match in four). The owners of small and medium farms were the most impoverished, but even the owners of large estates lost income by 40%. Consequence of the crisis were a regress in the area of new methods and tools in agriculture, as well as a return to natural economy. The countryside's overpopulation increased as well, since more and more people started to live off farming because of unemployment in the industry. From the economic point of view, it was a legion of unnecessary, surplus people (according to various estimations, it was from 2.5 to 8 m people).¹⁵

The government made attempts to find a way out of the crisis in farming by introducing economic interventionism's mechanisms, such as creating a crop reserve in case of war, or investing in food processing (by erecting warehouses, grain elevators, milk plants, cold stores). Default mechanisms to stop the prices from plummeting and special lines of credit for farmers were introduced. The process of recovering from the crisis was lengthy and gradual, and only in the fall of 1935 the living conditions of village dwellers improved. The last years preceding the WWII were marked by prosperity. The production rose, farmers invested in the machinery and fertilizers more. Yet, in general, the observed improvement was slower in the village than in the city.

2. The exploitation of Polish countryside during WWII

As early as in 1939, in the lands incorporated in the Third Reich, the Germans started displacement of Poles to the General Governorate. The abandoned farms were manned with Germans. Merging a few farms into one

¹⁵ J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 103.

was a well-known practice. By February 1942, the German authorities had confiscated as many as 900 thousand farms with the area of 9.2 m ha. Since 1941, the displacement reached the General Governorate as well, with the most drastic course in Zamojszczyzna.¹⁶

The farmers who had not been displaced, lost the ownership of their farms and went under the supervision of the German authorities, who made decisions on the entirety of production and the amount the farmers could use themselves. Constant supervision by the German agronomist and German neighbours rendered selling or hiding parts of production for their own purpose impossible.

The situation was quite different in the General Governorate where the German presence was too small to control the situation. The farmers were forced to meet quotas on nearly all agricultural produce. A substantial part (e.g. 40% of crops, 18% of potatoes, 73% of sweet beets) were to be sold for very low prices set by the authorities. The said quotas were continuously increased which led to lowering the standard of living in the village (tab. 4).

Table 4. Quotas on crops in the General Governorate in the years 1940–1943

Years	Quotas in tons	Years	Quotas in tons
1940	383 000	1942	1 200 000
1941	685 000	1943	1 500 000

Source: I. Kostrowicka, Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Historia gospodarcza Polski*, p. 425.

In case of failing to meet the compulsory supply quota, farmers faced severe punishment, death penalty included. Despite that, they sought other sources of income, and, if only it was feasible, sold the excess yield on the black market.

The economic exploitation of the Polish countryside involved also the workforce. The village dwellers were employed *en masse* in the German businesses operating for the benefit of German economy in the occupied

¹⁶ I. Kostrowicka, Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Historia gospodarcza Polski*, pp. 421–422.

lands. They were also transported into the Third Reich as forced labour. Workers from the village are estimated to have comprised approximately 75–80% of over 3 m forced labourers altogether.¹⁷

Even though the material situation of the village dwellers did not deteriorate as quickly as the situation of those from the cities, the economic exploitation contributed to a dramatic fall in the standard of living in the village. It was particularly true at the end of the war, when, due to the warfare, 25% of the buildings and economic facilities were ruined, nearly the entire inventory – horses, cows, pigs – were slain, the crops destroyed, and the fields remained mined long after the war rendering normal cultivation impossible.

The occupant's policy towards the countryside sparked resistance, which was manifested in a variety of ways: helping the guerilla fighters, hiding the Jews, defaulting on meeting the compulsory quotas, or evading transport to the Third Reich as forced labour. They all evoked repressive measures, including even the pacification of the entire villages.

In the areas occupied by the USSR, as early as 1939, private property was nationalized. To gain the support of villagers, most of the acquired land was subdivided, while in some areas, state farms (Pl. *Sowchozy*) were set up. The village collectivisation had been initiated, though it proceeded slowly. Establishing the kolkhozes was eventually interrupted by the attack of the Third Reich on the USSR in 1941. Rich farmers, also called kulaks (Pl. *kulak*) were deemed an enemy of the state and fought with by introducing high quotas on the agricultural produce supplied by them. All Poles living in the villages of the Eastern Borderlands experienced repressions, and farmers constituted the majority of Polish citizens deported to the interior of the USSR.

3. Years 1944–1956

The extent of the destruction of the village in the WWII negatively impacted the entirety of the Polish nation. The need to supply the food for

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 400–401.

the country forced the authorities to support the development of the individual farms. The farmers could apply for loans to rebuild their farms, purchase the seeds and livestock. The electrification of the countryside had commenced. However, such help proved insufficient because of the bad condition of the country.

The land reform in People's Poland

In the interwar period, the issues of agrarian structure and the overpopulation of the countryside remained unsolved. That is why the land reform was one of the core points in the Polish Workers' Party's (Pl. Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR) political programme. The need for the reform was also acknowledged by the representatives of the opposing parties, including the Polish People's Party (Pl. *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL*), even if they differed on the method of conducting it. Due to the political situation, ones to have the decisive voice belonged to the communists.

Following the provisions of the *Manifesto of the Polish Committee for National Liberation* of 22 July 1944, the land to be used to enlarge the existing farms to minimum 5 ha and create the new ones was to come from the large estates of more than 50 ha or 100 ha in size (the latter in Poznań, Gdańsk, and Silesian voivodeship) and farms confiscated from Germans and other people who were deemed the traitors of the nation.¹⁸ The details were to arrive in September 1944,¹⁹ and as late as in September 1946 for the western and northern voivodeships.²⁰

¹⁸ *Manifest PKWN*, in: *Dokumenty programowe polskiego ruchu robotniczego 1878–1984*, eds. N. Kołomejczyk, B. Syzdek, Warszawa 1986, p. 348. A promise to pay for the provisions for the former owners was not fulfilled in Poland. J. Skodlarski, *Zarys historii gospodarczej*, p. 371.

¹⁹ Dz.U. 1944, nr 4, poz. 17. In the decree it was specified, among others, that the farmers will pay for the acquired land an equivalent of a yearly yield, and it will be done in 10–20 yearly instalments.

²⁰ *Dekret z 6 września 1946 r. o ustroju rolnym i osadnictwie na Ziemiach Odzyskanych i obszarze byłego Wolnego Miasta Gdańsk*, Dz.U. 1946, nr 49, poz. 279.

The implementation of the reform differed quite significantly, depending on the territory of the country. In more overpopulated voivodeships the supply of excess land acquired by liquidating large estates depleted quickly (in Rzeszów or Lublin voivodeship there was enough land for only 20% of farmers). The assumed 5 ha average (for newly created farms) proved impossible to maintain. That is why the average size of such farms was c.a. 28 ha.²¹ In the areas west of the Vistula River, the situation was quite the opposite. In the Prussian partition, only economically secure farms could survive, and, according to the tradition, the oldest son usually inherited the farm, leaving his siblings with the need to find other means to support themselves.²² The assumed average of 5 ha was unattractive and economically unjustified, especially that land for share was abundant. The reason was that the post-German farms were slated for subdivision. Only raising the standard size of newly created farms to 7 ha temporarily increased interest in the process. In practice, newly created farms in Greater Poland were even bigger, up to 10–12 ha. As a result of subsequent controls, they were reduced to 7 ha. The farmers' reaction to the official regulations was to resign from the allotted land – the returns reached up to 70–80%.²³

The situation in the western voivodeships, where the land was taken over by the state from the Germans, was quite different. The large farms of more than 50 ha and large estates of more than 100 ha had comprised 59.8% of all the agricultural land in this area.²⁴ The land was of primary

²¹ I. Kostrowicka, Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Historia gospodarcza Polski*, p. 467; J. Kaliński, *Historia gospodarcza Polski Ludowej*, Białystok 2005, p. 10.

²² S. Jankowiak, *Przemiany w rolnictwie w europejskich krajach socjalistycznych w okresie powojennym (do końca lat 1950.)*, in: "Zboże państwu". *Rolnictwo i wieś w plakacie propagandowym Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej z lat 1950. Katalog wystawy czasowej w Muzeum Narodowym Rolnictwa i Przemysłu Rolno-Spożywczego w Szreniawie*, Szreniawa 2010, p. 18.

²³ H. Słabek, *Dzieje polskiej reformy*, pp. 124–126; S. Jankowiak, *Przemiany w rolnictwie w europejskich krajach socjalistycznych*, p. 19.

²⁴ J. Stanielewicz, *Kolonizacja wewnętrzna na Pomorzu Zachodnim w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym – próba ratowania czy rozkładu wielkiej własności?*, in: *Szlachta i ziemiaństwo polskie oraz niemieckie w Prusach i Niemczech w XVIII–XX w.*, ed. W. Stępiński, Szczecin 1996, p. 267; S. Łach, *Przekształcenia ustrojowo-gospodarcze w rolnictwie ziem zachodnich i północnych w latach 1945–1949 (studium historyczne)*, Słupsk 1993, p. 61; idem, *Rolnictwo na Pomorzu Zachodnim w latach 1945–1949*, Słupsk 1985, pp. 73–74.

importance, as it was to be the place where farmers from the interior of the country, for whom there was not enough land there, and the Poles coming from the USSR and the West were to be settled. A substantial excess of land and problems with settlement allowed for the allotment of land higher than in other areas (7 to 15 ha).²⁵

Despite the need of changes in the Polish countryside, the overall outcome of the reform was unsatisfactory. Even though the number of the smallest farms decreased, the fragmentation remained. The vast estates and large, prosperous individual farms disappeared from the rural landscape (tab. 5).

Table 5. Agrarian structure of the farms in years 1938 and 1949 (w %)

Size group	1938	1949	Change
Up to 2 ha	30.6	28.8	- 6
2-5 ha	33.8	32.5	- 4
5-10 ha	23.9	27.1	+ 13
10-20 ha	9.5	10.4	+ 10
20-50 ha	2.1	1.2	- 43

Source: J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 203.

By 1949, 6 m ha of land had been subdivided, 3 of which were situated in the west and north of Poland. 13 thousand of farms had been subdivided or taken over by the state.²⁶ In the remaining lands, 347 thousand new farms had been established, and 254 thousand old ones had been enlarged. The average size of the new farms was 5.4 ha. Conversely, in the regained territories 467 thousand new farms had been established with the average size of 7.9 ha.²⁷

²⁵ K. Kersten, *U podstaw kształtowania się nowej struktury agrarnej ziem zachodnich (1945-1947)*, "Polska Ludowa. Materiały i Studia" 1962, vol. 1, pp. 41-42; S. Łach, *Przekształcenia ustrojowo-gospodarcze*, p. 71.

²⁶ M. Batowski, *Gospodarka socjalistyczna w Polsce. Geneza - rozwój - upadek*, Warszawa 2009, p. 149.

²⁷ J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 203.

Small farms were at an economic disadvantage, unable to intensify production and were subject to tax pressure, thus dependent on the policies of the state.²⁸ That is how the groundwork was laid for later collectivisation.²⁹ Along with the reform, the process of exclusion of some estates from subdivision was introduced to build the central, state presence in the farming industry. Altogether, 3 m ha were owned by the state, most of which (c.a. two thirds) were located in the west and north.

The reform was to rally large masses behind the communists. That is why the opposition they encountered among farmers was of great surprise to them. Farmers refused to take the allotted “noble land” because of the precariousness of the new political system. The faith of farmers was undermined soon, in 1948, when the authorities embarked on the so-called allotment regulation, and subsequently collectivization. One consequence of the reform was the total destruction of the landed gentry as a social class and a radical decrease in number of rich farmers.

Collectivisation

The end of the 1940s saw the beginning of great changes in farming and an attempt of total rebuilding of the Polish countryside modelled on its Soviet counterpart. It entailed collectivisation, the restriction of the number of private farms, especially “kulak” ones, and the development of the central, state farming sector. The changes were ideologically driven and the communist authorities did not take into account either the social environment or economic consequences.

At first, the communists postponed the decision to turn villages into cooperatives (cooperative farms, or co-ops) or even denied plans to do so whatsoever.³⁰ They were aware that social climate in the countryside was

²⁸ M. Mieszczankowski, *Struktura agrarna Polski*, p. 329; J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 203.

²⁹ J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 204; S. Jankowiak, *Reforma*, p. 26.

³⁰ H. Słabek, *Dzieje polskiej reformy*, p. 127; J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 202.

not in favour of such a solution.³¹ The co-ops had particularly bad reputation among those who had an opportunity to see such farms in the USSR. In 1948, however, under the pressure of Stalin, the Polish United Workers' Party (Pl. *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR*) decided to commence the collectivization. Its implementation was delegated to voivodeship and district committees of the PZPR,³² accompanied with broad-scale propaganda activities in the press and the radio. The propaganda machine included all the cultural and educational institutions, schools and social organisations in the village communities. In the cities, groups of workers and youth were organised to be sent to the villages to agitate for the creation of cooperative farms.³³

Despite all the efforts of the propaganda machine, in 1949 – the first year of collectivization, only 243 co-ops, concentrating only 0.1% of all of the farms, were created. The authorities deemed the effects unsatisfactory and resorted to administrative means, political repressions, extortion and economic sanctions to force farmers to join the co-ops. Opponents encountered various repressions, e.g. higher taxes, crops and livestock requisition, fees, arrests; some of them were even sent to work camps. The countryside areas were also burdened with additional taxes in the form of, e.g., compulsory contribution to the Social Fund for Agricultural Development.³⁴ Rich farmers (kulaks) were particularly severely persecuted, being condemned as the enemies of the state.³⁵ The most infamous acts of terror occurring in the process of establishing the co-ops were reported in the

³¹ It was put to realization only after getting rid of PSL from the political scene. The situation was similar in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, where collectivization started after the failure of agrarian parties.

^w Mędrzecki, *Chłopi*, p. 148.

³² K. Kozłowski, *Między racją stanu a stalinizmem. Pierwsze dziesięć lat władzy politycznej na Pomorzu Zachodnim 1945–1955*, Warszawa–Szczecin 2000, p. 194.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 196.

³⁴ R. Winiewska, *Obciążenia podatkowe gospodarstw chłopskich w Polsce w latach 1945–1955*, Warszawa 1961, pp. 44–49.

³⁵ M. Nadolski, *Komuniści wobec chłopów w Polsce 1941–1956. Mity i rzeczywistość*, Warszawa 1993, p. 203; S. Jankowiak, *Wielkopolski kulak wrogiem państwa socjalistycznego*, “Biuletyn Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej” 2002, vol. 1, p. 30.

Gryfice district in 1951, though less spectacular ones took place all over the country.³⁶

Farmers' defensive strategy involved writing petitions to decrease the acreage of their farms and the taxes imposed or to change their political classification, e.g. ceasing to be seen as "kulaks". A more radical approach was to waive the rights to the farms, which happened in the north and west of the country.³⁷

The cooperative farms were established at various rates. It was most difficult to coerce the farmers into joining them in regions where the land was traditionally hereditary. In the old villages in Kielce, Krakow, Warsaw, Lodz and Lublin voivodeship it happened rather slowly then. Meanwhile, in the western and northern reaches, where the farms belonged to the displaced settlers and were the result of subdivision, the connection to the land was weaker and the number of co-ops was significantly higher.³⁸ By the end of 1955, 10 thousand such farms had been established, stretching over c.a. 1.9 m ha of land, which corresponded to 9% of all arable land in the country.³⁹ The differences are illustrated in the table below (tab. 6).

Mandatory participation in co-ops, lack of cooperative tradition, along with lack of attachment to the land they owned conducted to the prevailing disinterest of farmers in the results of their work. They cared more for their individual plots abutting their houses than the co-ops' land. It came as no surprise, then, that the effectiveness of the co-ops was significantly lower than the one of individual farms, which, despite the tax burden and restrictions, gave 14% higher yield per one hectare.⁴⁰

A consequence of this forced collectivization and economic drainage of the countryside was a breakdown in agricultural production in 1951. It did not reach the previous levels up until 1955. The farmers, fearing to lose their farms rarely decided to invest and the possibilities to modernize

³⁶ Cf. K. Kozłowski, *Materiały archiwalne do „wydarzeń gryfickich” z 1951r.*, Szczecin 1992.; M. Machałek, *Przemiany wsi zachodniopomorskiej*, Szczecin 2012, pp. 239–273.

³⁷ M. Machałek, *Przemiany wsi zachodniopomorskiej*, pp. 259–263.

³⁸ J. Kaliński J., Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski w XX ...*, p. 249.

³⁹ Ibidem; D. Jarosz, *Polityka władz komunistycznych w Polsce w latach 1948–1956 a chłopi*, Warszawa 1998, p. 22; J. Skodlarski, *Zarys historii gospodarczej*, p. 403.

⁴⁰ J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, pp. 249–250.

Table 6. The percentage of arable land used in cooperative farms according to the National Agricultural Censuses (1953–1956)

Voivodeship	Year			
	1953	1954	1955	1956
Poland	7.7	9.4	10.6	11.2
Warsaw Voivodeship	1.4	1.7	1.9	2.1
Bydgoszcz Voivodeship	8.7	13.5	16.5	18.3
Poznań Voivodeship	9.7	14.4	16.7	18.2
Łódź Voivodeship	1.7	2.0	2.7	2.6
Kielce Voivodeship	0.7	0.8	1.0	1.0
Lublin Voivodeship	2.3	3.4	3.3	3.1
Białystok Voivodeship	3.0	3.3	3.6	3.6
Olsztyn Voivodeship	8.2	9.3	10.2	10.8
Gdańsk Voivodeship	15.5	17.0	18.8	19.6
Koszalin Voivodeship	14.5	15.3	18.4	21.5
Szczecin Voivodeship	36.6	40.8	44.8	45.5
Wrocław Voivodeship	28.8	35.3	39.8	41.2
Opole Voivodeship	21.3	24.0	25.9	26.6
Katowice Voivodeship	2.0	2.4	2.4	2.6
Kraków Voivodeship	1.2	1.4	1.6	1.7
Rzeszów Voivodeship	4.2	5.1	5.3	5.6

Source: D. Jarosz, *Polityka władz komunistycznych*, p. 109.

were scarce due to the tax burden and restrictions to buy fertilizers or machinery, as well as artificially sustained low prices of produce. The pauperisation of farmers progressed. The state monopolised the prices of buy-in and set the limits on quotas of produce the farmer could supply, which left them completely dependent on the authorities, both economically and administratively.⁴¹ The agrarian structure of the farms deteriorated – there was a drop in the number of farms exceeding 5 ha.⁴² In such cases, the owners of small farms were forced to seek employment outside the farming sector, joining the social group of labour workers with a background in farming.⁴³

Building national sector in the farming industry

Even though, according to the official line of the central authorities, it was the individual sector that was supposed to lay at the foundation of the farming industry, already during the implementation of the reform they set about creating the state-governed sector, allotting it 10% of all the arable land. In 1946, Państwowe Nieruchomości Ziemskie (PZN; Eng. *State Real Estate*), which was supposed to put to use the vacated and devastated farms in the western and northern lands, was established.⁴⁴ Soon, its field of operation was extended to the old lands, even though the land retrieved there was much smaller,⁴⁵ as out of 1.6 m ha of all its holdings 1.3 lay in the new lands.⁴⁶ In the subsequent months, this situation changed continuously, as some land were intercepted and others dedicated for subdivision.

At the beginning of 1949, the PZN was merged with Państwowe Zakłady Hodowli Roślin (Eng. *State Plant Breeding Enterprise*) and

⁴¹ W. Mędrzecki, *Chłopi*, p. 153.

⁴² J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 252.

⁴³ W. Mędrzecki, *Chłopi*, p. 159.

⁴⁴ P. Dziurzyński, *Osadnictwo rolne na Ziemiach Odzyskanych*, Warszawa 1983, p. 128. Cf. H. Duda, *Państwowe Nieruchomości Ziemskie w Opolu (1946–1949). Zarys monograficzny*, Opole 2006.

⁴⁵ W. Rogala, *Działalność Państwowych Nieruchomości Ziemskich (1946–1949)*, “Rocznik Muzeum Rolnictwa w Szreniawie” 1972, vol. 5, p. 31.

⁴⁶ W. Maringe, E. Englicht, *Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne (zarys rozwoju w kolejnych okresach)*, “Zagadnienia Ekonomiki Rolnej” 1959, vol. 4 (34), p. 38.

Państwowe Zakłady Chowu Koni (Eng. *State Horse Breeding Enterprise*), thus creating the State Agricultural Farms (Pl. *Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne*). They entered the landscape of the Polish countryside for good and became a symbol of a sort of the changes the Soviets introduced in agriculture. They were intended to be the model farms guaranteeing food supply for the population in the cities, increasing due to industrialization. However, despite preferential treatment, their effectiveness was in fact not only lower than the individual farms', but even incurred permanent losses. In 1955, the global production from 1 ha, calculated in PLN, in individual farms brought 621, in co-ops – 517 and in PGRs as little as 394. Only the crops yield, owing to the mechanisation, was similar to individual farms.⁴⁷

The reasons for such results were mismanagement, centrally imposed economic plans not taking local conditions into consideration and obliging the farmers to cultivate the idle land, as well as taxes and social benefit fee burden.⁴⁸ To make matters worse, careless management, wastefulness, theft, lack of work ethics and discipline among employees were observed. Along with hard working conditions and relatively low wages, it all conducted to the overall image the one painted by the official propaganda.

Until 1955, 6 thousand the PGR farms were established, cultivating 12% of all arable land in the country, two thirds of which were situated in the western and northern territories, one fourth in Poznań, Bydgoszcz, and Gdańsk voivodeships, and one tenth in the remaining areas.⁴⁹ The area owned by the PGRs grew continuously reaching in 1990 its highest, though the area was still predominantly in the western territories (over 50% of the land used by PGRs were in Koszalin and Stettin voivodeships).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ J. Skodlarski, *Zarys historii gospodarczej*, p. 404.

⁴⁸ W. Dzun, *Państwowe gospodarstwa rolne w procesie przemian systemowych w Polsce*, Warszawa 2005, p. 20.

⁴⁹ I. Bukraba-Rylska, *Socjologia wsi polskiej*, p. 348.

⁵⁰ *Rolnictwo i Gospodarka Żywnościowa 1986–1990*, GUS, Warszawa 1992, p. 81.

4. Years 1956–1989

1956 brought important changes, also for the countryside. The most spectacular was the dissolution of some of the cooperative farms. Out of ten thousand, only 1,500 farms survived. The reason for that were farmers' objections and fears that the political climate supporting such initiatives would soon pass.⁵¹ Decollectivization, which was characteristic, was highest in the new lands, where most of such farms had been set up in the first place.⁵² In the heyday of the Polish thaw, most of the village dwellers understood Władysław Gomułka's comments and the decree of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party as a departure from the collectivization policy. As a matter of fact, the party and state authorities did not as much resign from it, but postponed it, choosing the alternative manner – creating machinery rings (Pl. *kółko rolnicze*), preparing farmers for further cooperative farming.

Since October 1956, the state policy on the individual farmers had changed as well. The compulsory quotas had been limited, the buy-in prices raised, the taxation burden alleviated and the farmers had been allowed to apply for loans in the banks. These concessions brought a shift in the social climate in the countryside and an immediate rise in agricultural production. In 1957, the yield was highest of all observed after the war, though still insufficient to meet the demand for the produce.

The 1960s were marked by stagnation, and in 1962 and 1964, due to the poor harvest, the production dropped to the pre-war level. Meanwhile, urbanisation and industrialisation brought about increased demand for food. The social unrest was particularly triggered by the shortage of crops, especially used for the purpose of breeding. Among factors infringing the

⁵¹ D. Jarosz, *Polityka władz komunistycznych*, p. 152.

⁵² In Stettin voivodeship, 90% of co-ops were dissolved, in Wrocław – 97.5%, in Zielonagóra 96.2% and in Opole voivodeship – 92.4%. Cf. D. Jarosz, *Polityka władz komunistycznych*, p. 151. R. Skobelski, *Specyfika kolektywizacji rolnictwa na ziemiach zachodnich i północnych Polski w latach 1948–1956*, in: *Dzieje i przyszłość polskiego ruchu ludowego*, vol. II: *Polska Ludowa (1944/45–1989)*, eds W. Paruch, S.J. Pastuszka, R. Turkowski, Warszawa 2002, p. 320.

production there were not only high taxes, but also regulated taxation, too low prices of the produce and extensive methods of cultivation. Low effectiveness was also the result of too small a size of the farm, limited access to machinery and fertilisers and evident aging of the village population. Difficult farming conditions and lack of prospects for the change for the better in the future discouraged young people from remaining in the countryside.⁵³

A more noticeable change in the central policy towards individual farmers occurred the 1970s and was caused by worse and worse food supply in the country. The authorities were aware that the PGRs would not be able to satisfy the alimentary needs of the nation. In 1972, the compulsory quotas on produce were lifted and the farmers were allowed to apply for investment credit. The PGRs still had priority, however individual farmers, in exchange for the supply contracts, were given access to coveted machines, tools and fertilisers.⁵⁴ It was also made possible to enlarge the acreage of the farms to 8–20 ha; prohibiting the division of farms smaller than 8 ha prevented their further fragmentation. Farmers had access to free, universal healthcare for the first time and they were granted pensions, at first only if they ceded the ownership of their farms to the state. Such changes eventuated in some farmers, particularly the young and educated ones, to attempt to intensify and specialize the production. The majority, however, especially in the eastern voivodeships, stuck to the old methods of cultivation.⁵⁵

Regardless of the concessions made for the benefit of farmers, the authorities actively supported the state sector. For that purpose, factories producing fertilisers and agricultural machinery (e.g. Ursus) were built. The acreage of PGRs increased constantly by taking over the farms the ownership of which was waived in exchange for a pension. That is how 10% of the individual farms changed hands. It was the greatest dent in private ownership after the forced collectivisation period. The consequence

⁵³ J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, pp. 265–266, J. Skodlarski, *Zarys historii gospodarczej*, p. 441.

⁵⁴ W. Mędrzecki, *Chłopi*, p. 156.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 160.

of this increase in the arable land was a rise in employment (the number of workers with their families nearly reached one million people) (tab. 7). In 1970, PGRs covered over 16% of arable land, though their production accounted for only 14%.⁵⁶

Table 7. Change in the acreage and employment of the State Agricultural Farms (PGRs)

Years	Area (thousands. ha.)	Employment (thousands)	Number of employees (people per 100 ha)
1950	2 212	276.3	15.1
1960	2 922	339.3	14.0
1970	3 393	391.4	13.6
1980	4 216	490.3	13.3
1990	3 935	395.0	12.1

Source: I. Bukraba-Rylska, *Socjologia wsi polskiej*, p. 347.

After 1980, the legal status of individual farms had slightly improved (the obstacles in land inheritance were lifted).⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the general condition of the farming sector was poor, only aggravating the problem with food supply. Low mechanisation, little use of pesticides and fertilisers resulted in a much lower yield than in the Western countries. The introduction of the martial law only made it worse, as due to restrictions imposed by the West, the import of fodder was ceased, leading to the breakdown in the breeding sector.

Throughout the entire period after WWII, the employment structure in the village was subject to change. An increasingly smaller percentage of the population made a living with farming, and the civilizational gap between the village and the city grew. In the 1970s the equipment of a household in the village (either individual farmer or a worker in a State Agricultural Farm) did not vary significantly from the facilities used by a city worker. The cultural gap between the village and the city was decreasing,

⁵⁶ J. Kaliński, Z. Landau, *Gospodarka Polski*, p. 287.

⁵⁷ W. Mędrzecki, *Chłopi*, p. 152.

owing to universal education, literacy, the popularization of press, and subsequently the radio and television. Under their influence, a process of abandoning the folk culture for the benefit of the city lifestyle, adjusted to the countryside conditions, occurred.⁵⁸ It took place more rapidly among the workers of State Agricultural Farms with a specified working hours than individual farmers working dawn till dusk. It could be observed in case of cultural and social life exemplified by the village community centres, and, since the 1960s, the cafeterias. The PGR housing units' dwellers visited them much more frequently than individual farmers. The folk culture, traditions and habits, officially hailed as very valuable, were cultivated only during celebrations and official events rather than out of personal convictions of village dwellers.

* * *

The year 1989, introducing the free market mechanisms, brought significant changes in the condition of the Polish village. They did not prove beneficial for everybody. A lion's share of small farm's owners could not stand the competition. The land concentration process started.⁵⁹ State Agricultural Farms, liquidated in 1991, disappeared, which entailed problems of unemployment in the areas where their concentration had been highest (West Pomeranian, Warmian and Masurian, Lubusz voivodeship); the issue was not properly tackled.⁶⁰ Restructuring and privatisation of the farms did not have noticeable impact on the ownership structure of the sector. The interest in post-PGR land was low, and the majority of it was sold or leased

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 161.

⁵⁹ I. Bukraba-Rylska, *Socjologia wsi polskiej*, p. 205.

⁶⁰ M. Machątek, *Wokół genezy społecznych konsekwencji obecności państwowych gospodarstw rolnych na wsi zachodniopomorskiej: Od polonizacji do europeizacji Pomorza Zachodniego*, eds. M. Machątek, J. Macholaka, E. Włodarczyka, Warszawa–Szczecin 2012, pp. 289–302. More in this topic: E. Tarkowska, K. Korzeniewska, *Młodzież Młodzież z byłych PGR-ów. Raport z badań*, Warszawa 2002, p. 5.

to the agricultural enterprises.⁶¹ Mechanisation and changes in production resulted in a rapid fall in employment in farming, and consequently in changes of the overall employment structure in the village areas, where fewer and fewer people earned their living as farmers.

⁶¹ W. Zgliński, *Przekształcenia restrukturyzacyjno-własnościowe Państwowych Gospodarstw Rolnych oraz obecne zagospodarowanie obszarów popegeerowskich*, http://psz.praca.gov.pl/documents/10828/152656/Zalacznik_pgr_1.pdf/359d8c1a-628b-48e8-a53a-345ec3f27479?t=1403435956000 [access 19.07.2019].

