

# Propaganda in Poland During the Stalinist Period (1945-1956): The Case of Poznań Voivodeship

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**ABSTRACT:** This article will address the issue of communist propaganda in the Poznań Voivodeship from 1945 to 1956. This voivodeship was one of the 14 administrative regions into which Poland was divided at that time. The chronological scope covers the period from 1945, marking the occupation of the region by the Red Army and the subsequent takeover by the communists, to 1956, which marks the end of the Stalinist era in Poland. Due to space constraints, this article will address only the issue of propaganda methods, specifically individual agitation and mass propaganda. Before delving into the main part of the article, the current state of research on propaganda in Poland during the analyzed period will be presented, along with definitions of the term "propaganda." The primary sources for this work are archival materials stored in the State Archive in Poznań, produced by the Polish Workers' Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza), which, from 1948, was known as the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza), the organization responsible for conducting propaganda activities.

**KEYWORDS:** communism propaganda, Stalinist period

## Introduction

It is commonly believed that propaganda and terror were two major pillars of the communist system. Some researchers point out that the propaganda was more important as it openly accompanied Polish citizens from birth to death while the Security Service's control was carried out secretly and the terror affected only a small percentage of the population (Kamiński 2004, 10). The period between 1944-56 was very specific. The communists came to power in Poland in the situation when they were not supported by majority of the population, as evidenced by the results obtained by the Polish Communist Party in the elections in the period of the Second Polish Republic (II RP). The Stalin period was marked by the strongest intensity of propaganda activities and efforts to put society under strict control. The communists' rule in Poland after World War II was not the effect of the society's conscious choice, but the political decision made by the leader of the Soviet Union with the British Prime Minister's and the US President's acceptance. Pursuant to the conference arrangements in Teheran (28 XI – 1 XII 1943) and Jalta (4 – 11 II 1945) a new political order was introduced in Poland after 1944. Therefore, it could be agreed that in the period considered, the situation was exceptional – the totalitarian, imposed from abroad government used propaganda against the averse society on a massive scale. This work is meant to be an analysis of the government's activities concerning propaganda in such an extreme situation. It must also be noted that the communist propaganda of the Stalin period had a significant impact on Polish society. The images that it created are still present in the collective memory of the generation that remembers the period considered. However, no other study has investigated this problem. Political scientists, sociologists, and media experts rarely use archival sources, while historians rarely use propaganda theories in their studies. This work is meant to fill this research gap. In this article, I will address the issue of communist propaganda in the Poznań Voivodeship from 1945 to 1956. This voivodeship was one of the 14 administrative regions into which Poland was divided at that time. The chronological scope covers the period from 1945, marking the occupation of the region by the Red Army and the subsequent takeover by the communists, to 1956, which marks the end of the Stalinist era in Poland. Due to space constraints, this article will address only the issue of propaganda methods, specifically individual agitation and mass propaganda. Before delving into the main part of the article, I will present the current state of research on propaganda in Poland during the analyzed period and provide definitions of the term

"propaganda." The primary sources for this work are archival materials stored in the State Archive in Poznań, produced by the Polish Workers' Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza), which, from 1948, was known as the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza), the organization responsible for conducting propaganda activities.

### **State of research on propaganda**

Actions of central and capital institutions responsible for propaganda have been researched well in historiography. In the 1980s and 90s, Krawczyk (1994) described the central structures and activities of the Ministry of Information and Propaganda. His achievements were supplemented by Joniec (2011, 763-781) with his analysis of the MIandP central structure. In his publication, Mariusz Jarzab described the internal hierarchy, the staff as well as the activities of the Department of Propaganda of the PZPR's Warszawskie Voivodship Committee in the period between 1949-1953 (Jarzab 1999). The author focused only on the Warszawskie voivodship without the city of Warsaw.

Besides the structure of those institutions, the historians also analyzed means and methods of the propaganda activities and, less frequently, analytical functions of the propaganda machine. In this case the researchers restricted their interest to either a geographical region or one direction or "section" of the propaganda activities (the expression comes from the party propaganda at that time and meant aiming the propaganda effort at a particular recipient or a specific topic around which the propaganda activities were carried out). Pleskot (2016) studied the capital structures of the Ministry of Information and Propaganda. He devoted little space to the structural dimension but focused on the propaganda courses of action and on the analytical function of the Ministry department in Warsaw. Szulc (2015) studied propaganda in Pomorze Zachodnie (Western Pomerania) between 1949-1956. Both books mainly reproduce factography. They are important for this project of dissertation for two reasons. Firstly, they prove that there is source basis to research this topic. Secondly, they leave numerous, more general questions without answers (like sense, efficiency and efficacy of propaganda). The authors themselves encourage further research in this field (Pleskot 2016).

Besides doing analyzes restricted to a given area, the historians also concentrated on the propaganda in a more problematic approach. Political propaganda has been studied most thoroughly. This problem is described in Czyżniewski's comprehensive monograph (Czyżniewski 2005). The author analyzed the means as well as the methods of propaganda. This topic is described also in numerous articles, such as Kersten's (2001, 169-179) and Mazur's (2015, 61-79) studies, which focused on the communist propaganda against Home Army (Armia Krajowa). The propaganda activities concerning the Warsaw Uprising were described by Rabiński (2012) and Sawicki (S2005). The referendum of 1946 (Zaćmiński 2013) and the elections in 1947 (Skoczylas 2003) have also been described well in the related literature. The propaganda in schools was described by Ryba (2006), Wołoszyn (2012) and, to small extent, by Kosiński (2011). Another important publication is the book by the above mentioned Mazur (2009), which describes the efforts to change the mentality of the society through propaganda.

### **Definitions of propaganda**

Propaganda activities have accompanied people practically from the beginning of the emergence of power structures, but it was not until the first half of the 20th century that it began to be dealt with in a scientific manner. It was then that a new field of science was born - the theory of political propaganda and public opinion. The date of the birth of this new discipline is 1931 and the publication of the article A Psychological Definition of Propaganda by the American researcher William W. Bidelle (Dobek-Ostrwiska 1999, 19). The word propaganda itself means to disseminate, spread, explain and is derived from the Latin *propagation* propagate. The word

*propagatio* in ancient times meant to take care of the development of plants and to accelerate their tillering (Kula 2005, 8). Currently, three groups of sciences deal with the topic of propaganda. First is social psychology, which mainly analyzes changes in the behaviour and attitudes of individuals as a result of propaganda activities. Secondly, the sociological sciences, which analyze the impact of propaganda on the functioning of society, and thirdly, the political sciences, including communication sciences, which analyze the actions of government and the impact of propaganda in manipulating public opinion.

The first person to undertake a consideration in this regard was the aforementioned W. Bidell. He recognized that propaganda has several characteristics, it always appeals to emotion rather than reason, it fuels conflict by portraying the world in black and white terms, clearly identifying the enemy. The effect of propaganda should be decisions made by the individual in the full belief that they are their own choices, and are in fact the result of propaganda action. It is significant that Bidelle (1931, 283-295) believed that the sender of propaganda should always be anonymous and unknown to the receiver. Polish scholar Witold Lutoslawski emphasized that propaganda is influencing the actions of recipients only voluntarily, the use of coercion makes it impossible to call a given action propaganda (Lutosławski 1942, 1). Krech and Crutchfield (1948, 490) considered propaganda to be extremely effective. In the view of both authors, propaganda is the process of creating a specific language linked to an individual's entire culture and social affiliation. A specific person begins to think in specific and predictable categories, which makes it possible to direct his or her views and desires. Edward Bernays is another researcher addressing the issue of propaganda. It should be noted that the American author himself considered himself more of a specialist in the study of what we now call public relations, rather than strictly propaganda. However, the makers of propaganda in Nazi Germany drew on his achievements, and Bernays' views themselves are highly controversial (Lakomy 2019). The American scholar believed that propaganda is used by representatives of virtually all areas of society, not only politics, but also representatives of business and culture.

Propaganda itself is a consistent and constant effort to create an event that influences the public's attitude towards a particular enterprise, idea, person or group of people (Bernays 1928, 25). Fraser considered propaganda mainly as an action aimed at concealing the true picture of reality, which causes a person to perform actions that he or she would not have taken if he or she had the proper knowledge and information. The English scholar clearly emphasizes that propaganda cannot appeal to reason, but only to emotions Fraser (1957, 1). Jowett and Donnell have been working on propaganda for almost 30 years and have produced a concrete definition of it - propaganda is a deliberate and continuous effort to influence perception, manipulate thought and direct behaviour so as to achieve a result in terms of audience response that is as consistent as possible with the propagandist's intentions. Propaganda activities must have a specific purpose and be undertaken by a particular group in a carefully planned manner and based on a deliberate strategy. The aim of propaganda is to induce a specific group of people to behave in a certain way. Its effectiveness can be measured by the quality of the response received from the audience, which most often means that they take a specific action or adopt the views in question as their own (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012, 37). Pratkanis and Aronson (2005, 17) regard propaganda as the ability to use appropriate messages to stimulate a person's emotions and prejudices, with the aim of inducing the recipient to adopt the propagandist's point of view as his or her. Both authors consider propaganda disseminated through mass media to be extremely effective. Even if an individual, who is constantly attacked with specific views through the media, believes that the world presented by the media is not true, he does not reject the propaganda messages in their entirety. He or she then falls into cognitive dissonance, and thus accepts two contradictory views at the same time and tries to reconcile them with each other, with the result that some part of the propaganda message will always remain in the individual's consciousness.

## Results and discussion

The effectiveness of propaganda efforts, in addition to the organizational dimension of the bureaucratic apparatus and the education level and skills of its employees, also depends on the proper adjustment of propaganda means to the audience's level. Poland during the Stalinist period was a very poor country. The extensive destruction during the war caused significant problems for the state authorities in using more sophisticated propaganda methods. The lack of funds caused problems in creating an extensive radio network or producing a larger number of films. The society was also very poor, and only a very small number of people could afford to buy radio receivers. It should also be noted that besides technical limitations, the low level of education in Polish society influenced the propaganda means used. Right after World War II, there were still 4 million illiterates in Poland. These two factors mainly influenced the selection of propaganda means used by the communists (State Archives in Poznań, Department of Propaganda and Culture, Materials from Committees and Teams within the Department, Provincial Corrections in the Reading Room, 1950-1952: 74/VII/8).

Individual agitation was considered the most important propaganda tool by the communists. It should be clearly emphasized the great importance attached to this method in the internal documentation, whether in the Ministry of Information and Propaganda or in the Propaganda Department at the Central Committee. Properly conducted individual agitation was expected to bring great benefits and penetrate deeper into society. The main way used by agitators to convince the ordinary person of the communists' slogans was to connect general propaganda slogans and central government actions with the everyday life and problems of the individual. The agitator was supposed to act continuously, both at the workplace during duties, during breaks in the canteen, in community centers, and in public transport. It was also recommended to go to private homes to hold conversations and distribute propaganda leaflets.

Agitators used several working techniques. First, they presented colorful illustrations, photos, posters, charts, and sometimes even films to interest the audience. Second, they often read aloud newspaper articles or other specially prepared propaganda materials. Third, they used a method called "gawenda"—preparing a short speech on a chosen topic and then encouraging discussion and drawing independent conclusions by the audience. This technique was considered highly effective because when a person independently arrives at conclusions based on presented facts, they are more convinced of them (State Archives in Poznań, Department of Propaganda and Culture, Materials from Committees and Teams within the Department, Protocols from Department Meetings, 1949-1952: 74/VII/2, Vol. 1).

Individual agitation was most extensively used in rural areas. This was due to two main factors. First, rural areas were dominated by less educated people, and most illiterates were there. Due to technical limitations, it was very difficult to reach rural residents using other propaganda methods. Second, in the post-war period, the communist authorities were conducting collectivization and had to conduct extensive propaganda efforts in the countryside to persuade peasants.

In individual agitation outside cities, workers were often used. Special brigades or units were formed from them, and during working hours, they were sent to the countryside to help farmers with fieldwork while simultaneously conducting political agitation among them. The average agitator was usually a party member, first of the PPR and later the PZPR. Workers, soldiers, and members of the Polish Youth Union were also used. It is difficult to determine the average number of agitators working daily. Based on preserved documentation, it can be assumed that about 8,600 people were permanently engaged in individual agitation nationwide. However, their number was significantly expanded temporarily. Before the 1952 elections, over 800,000 people were involved in the agitation campaign (State Archives in Poznań, Department of Propaganda and Culture, Materials from Committees and Teams within the Department, Materials Concerning City Communication Movements, 1949-1955: 74/VII/20).

Communists themselves ambiguously assessed the results of individual agitation. In the source documentation, many critical remarks can be found about activities in this area. The most frequently raised accusations included the low level of knowledge and skills of agitators. Some were not interested in any propaganda activities at all and focused mainly on feasting and having fun with those they were supposed to enlighten. Others, due to their low level of knowledge and education, were often compromised by better-educated listeners when they could not provide appropriate information during discussions. The moral level of yet others was so low that their behavior in private life often contradicted their words, which did not ensure them authority and respect in the environment they operated in. Another frequently raised accusation against individual agitation, which was believed to result in its low effectiveness, related to the random and unplanned conduct of the agitation actions themselves. They were mainly carried out before holidays or periodic events such as elections. There was a lack of systematic and well-thought-out individual agitation (State Archives in Poznań, Department of Propaganda and Culture, Materials from Committees and Teams within the Department, Protocols from Meetings and Seminars Organized by the Department, 1953-1955: 74/VII/3, 1951 Vol. 2).

Three forms of mass propaganda can be distinguished. The most commonly used were "mass meetings" organized in workplaces, followed by rallies. Additionally, the Wrocław Recovered Territories Exhibition, opened on July 21, 1948, and lasting three months, is worth mentioning. This large-scale event was followed live by over 3 million people throughout its duration. Mass propaganda was considered by the communists to be less effective than individual agitation. However, they appreciated the ability to reach a large number of people in a very easy way, and due to the lack of other means such as radio or television, it was actually the only form of mass communication with society. Rallies, like individual agitation, were widely used during the Stalinist period and became a part of everyday life for a large portion of Poland's population. It should be emphasized that the inauguration of the new authorities in the liberated areas began with a large rally during which residents could meet the new representatives of the authorities and their program. Rallies were attended by several to even several thousand people. The largest ones were organized at the Warsaw stadium. In the source material, no specific data on the number of rallies and the number of participants were found. It should also be noted that propaganda structures members were evaluated based on the number of meetings held. Therefore, it can be suspected that they significantly inflated the numbers of both meetings and participants (State Archives in Poznań, Department of Propaganda and Culture, Materials from Committees and Teams within the Department, Protocols from Meetings and Seminars Organized by the Department, 1953-1955: 74/VII/3, 1953 Vol. 6).

There is information showing the scale of mass propaganda. During the campaign before the 1946 referendum, about 20,000 mass meetings were organized, gathering 4.5 million people. In the case of mass meetings in workplaces, it happened that in one month, about 200 such meetings were organized. Rallies were almost always organized by the authorities, but very often, they tried to hide this fact. Gatherings were presented as supposedly spontaneously organized by society, and efforts were even made to involve Catholic priests in their organization. They were asked to announce rallies during mass, which were deliberately held right next to churches. The organizational scheme of the meeting was very similar. At least one speech was delivered, special posters and propaganda slogans were prepared, and at the end, a resolution or stance was adopted together. The main attraction was the appearance of a special guest, usually a central government official (State Archives in Poznań, Department of Propaganda and Culture, Materials from Committees and Teams within the Department, Protocols from Meetings and Seminars Organized by the Department, 1953-1955: 74/VII/3, 1952 Vol. 5).

The effectiveness of mass propaganda depended largely, as in the case of individual agitation, on the organizers of these meetings, especially the main speaker. Their level varied greatly, but critical remarks about them dominate in the source material. The same or very similar speeches were delivered repeatedly, read from a sheet in a style difficult for the audience to follow. The participants themselves were mostly not interested in the course of the meeting, which is consistently confirmed by almost all reports. Participants talked among themselves, often even slept, and were not interested in the course of the gathering (State Archives in Poznań, Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) in Poznań, Instructions from the Central Committee of the PZPR Regarding Propaganda, 1952: 74/V/10).

One of the propaganda means similar in form to mass meetings were production meetings. They were mainly organized in industrial plants but were also convened in schools, offices, and production cooperatives. They were intended to fulfill several tasks. First, they were supposed to give employees a sense of being co-hosts and co-owners of a given workplace. Secondly, they also served to strengthen communist ideology among the participants. During these meetings, political issues were discussed, and references were made to the current social and international situation of Poland, presenting it according to the prevailing ideology. Thirdly, they aimed to explain the adopted production plans to the average employee. During these meetings, the tasks that everyone should fulfill were discussed, organizational and bureaucratic issues were addressed, the introduction of facilitations or improvements in production was discussed, and employees were encouraged to initiate rationalization activities. Fourthly, it was recommended to discuss all problems related to work competition during these meetings. The best employees were to be pointed out and praised, while the least efficient ones were to be criticized (State Archives in Poznań, Department of Propaganda and Culture, Materials from Committees and Teams within the Department, General Information, 1953-1954: 74/VII/4, Vol. 2).

The practical results of production meetings were minimal. In the source material, many accusations raised by the central authorities regarding the conducted meetings in workplaces can be found. They took place too rarely, the attendance was low, and their topics were very monotonous. Political and ideological issues were not often discussed. There were cases where meetings turned into a major criticism by workers towards the managers of a given workplace or generally towards the communist authorities. Complaints were made about poor work organization, excessive duties, the poor quality of materials supplied to the enterprise, and the communist authorities were blamed for the country's problems.

Celebrations of holidays were among the most important propaganda events for several reasons. Firstly, they allowed for the conduction of large-scale propaganda using all possible methods and means. Secondly, holiday celebrations were not limited to a single day; they were always preceded by several weeks of preparatory activities. Thirdly, holidays enabled the combination of propaganda activities with emotional impact, which, according to many theorists, is crucial for the effectiveness of propaganda.

During the Stalinist period, we can distinguish two major holidays. The first was May 1st, which was undoubtedly the main holiday, and the second was July 22nd, the anniversary of the establishment of communist Poland. These holidays had somewhat different characters. May 1st had a more official nature, while July 22nd took the form of a family picnic. Preparations for the May Day celebrations began several weeks before the holiday itself. This was especially visible in schools, where students were made to learn poems and songs, decorations were prepared for the parade, and academies were organized. Youth were taken on trips to factories, shown exhibitions, and films on appropriate themes. Even preschool children were engaged in propaganda activities, receiving sweets during trips and meetings. In 1949 alone, over 1 million candy packages were distributed to children (State Archives in Poznań, Department of Propaganda and Culture, Materials from Committees and Teams

within the Department, Protocols from Meetings and Seminars Organized by the Department, 1953-1955: 74/VII/3, 1952 Vol. 4).

Intensive preparations for May Day could also be observed in workplaces. Workers were encouraged to adopt resolutions condemning the capitalist system while praising socialism and to increase work efficiency through various financial rewards and symbolic honors such as medals and decorations. The Ministry of Information and Propaganda, and later the Propaganda Department, mainly ensured the preparation of parade routes, appropriate decoration of workplaces and streets, and the issuance of special newspapers and leaflets on the May Day theme. The May Day parade was the culmination of the holiday celebrations, symbolizing the strength of the new government. The primary measure of success was high attendance, and both persuasion and threats were used to compel everyone to participate. Workers were to receive all financial dues before the holiday, while non-participation in the parade could result in job loss, expulsion from educational institutions, or eviction from housing. For several weeks after May 1st, the press published reports on the celebrations and information on the fulfillment of commitments made by workers during the holiday. Attendance at the celebrations was generally high due to the authorities' intensive actions. Often, participants were brought from other distant regions, with workers taken to the countryside and peasants to the cities. The threats of job and housing loss also played a significant role. Reports from both propaganda institutions and the Security Office consistently confirmed the low engagement of participants.

July 22nd had a slightly different character. Formally called the Holiday of Rebirth, it had the status of the most important communist holiday in Poland, commemorating the announcement of the PKWN Manifesto. The holiday fell during the summer vacation period, which meant less student involvement in its preparation. On July 22nd, more emphasis was placed on organizing outdoor events and sports competitions. Parades were held, but they were clearly smaller than the May Day ones.

In addition to the two major holidays mentioned above, many minor celebrations were also observed, such as International Women's Day on March 8th and anniversaries of various battles from World War II. The organizational pattern was very similar, with several days of preparatory activities.

It is also important to mention the communists' attempts to first co-opt and, when that failed, later abolish Constitution Day on May 3rd and Independence Day on November 11th. In 1944 and 1945, the new government celebrated both holidays, with Red Army units also participating. However, the celebrations had a distinctly anti-Soviet character, leading to a change in the communists' decision, and in 1946, they banned the celebrations of both holidays. The events of May 3, 1946, were particularly violent. The new government wanted to prevent any celebrations at all costs, seeing them as competition to the May Day parades. An official ban on organizing any May 3rd celebrations was issued, but it was published only a day before, resulting in many people being unaware of the directive. Spontaneous celebrations of Constitution Day in many cities led to clashes with the military and police, resulting in one fatality—a 22-year-old man in Łódź. The events of May 3, 1946, indicate the low effectiveness of communist propaganda activities—two years after they took power, people were still very hostile towards them. On the other hand, the brutal clashes and fights frightened the population, leading to the discontinuation of both Independence Day and Constitution Day celebrations in subsequent years (State Archives in Poznań, Department of Propaganda and Culture, Materials from Committees and Teams within the Department, Information on the Course of May 1st Celebrations, 1949-1950: 74/VII/20).

During 1944-1948, the new communist authorities also attempted to utilize church holidays, particularly Christmas and All Saints' Day. Local party authorities organized Christmas Eve dinners and distributed gifts under the Christmas tree. On November 1st, the

fallen of World War II were commemorated. However, with the tightening of overall policies in 1948, such activities ceased.

## Conclusions

In summary, it should be noted that the communist authorities in the Stalinist period conducted extensive propaganda campaigns in the Poznań Voivodeship. Without a doubt, propaganda, alongside the terror employed by the police and military forces, can be considered one of the main tools used by the communist authorities to maintain power. Among the most important propaganda means used during the analyzed period were individual agitation and mass propaganda. The use of these two types of propaganda was partly due to necessity, as a significant portion of Polish society at that time was illiterate, and material difficulties hindered the widespread use of radio and print media, while television did not yet exist. On the other hand, it stemmed from the deep conviction of communist party members that in direct conversation with citizens, they would be able to persuade them to their ideology. The communist authorities devoted enormous resources to their propaganda activities; however, they themselves assessed their efforts quite critically. The large protests that erupted in 1956, culminating in an uprising against the communist regime, demonstrate that propaganda was not as effective as the communists had envisioned.

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