Political party archives: the system of recording and conveying information in local structures of the communist party in Poland's Biała Podlaska province, from 1975 to 1989

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Abstract

The communist party had a developed organisational structure which consisted of numerous elements forming a system of mutual dependencies and a very unique office personnel who was in charge of managing the said system. The aim of the article is to describe the system of recording and the flow of information in local structures of communist party in Poland between 1975 and 1989 which were formed from provincial party organisation, meaning provincial party committees and all their subordinate committees and lower-level organisations. It was an enormous bureaucratic system which, in bigger provinces, could be made up from even a few thousand of activists, some involved more, some less in shaping the life of the society, distributing information and producing documentation about the party functioning.

Keywords Archives · Bureaucracy · Document · Communism · Party · Poland · Polish Workers' Party · Polish United Workers' Party

Introduction

Appointed by the Soviet Union, the communist party which governed Poland, or the Polish Workers' Party (Polish: Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR) between 1944 and 1948 and the Polish United Workers' Party (Polish: Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) between 1948 and 1990, had a vast organisational structure. It consisted of numerous elements forming a system of mutual dependencies and a

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very unique office personnel who were in charge of managing the above-mentioned system. The aim of this article is to describe the system of recording and conveying information in local (provincial) structures of the communist party in Poland.

The main rules of the party's functioning originated from Lenin's principles are designed for the Bolshevik party: (a) the principle of party membership, (b) the principle of building the party on the basis of a system of primary party organisations, (c) party structures based on territorial and production aspects, (d) democratic centralism.

The nature of PPR and PZPR was the result of the ideological basis of functioning. All communist parties, with the Bolsheviks at the forefront, followed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, were total organisations. This premise reduced the state governed by communists to a class organisation of enforcement and politics, making the party a quasi-state creation. Party structures based on territorial and production aspects resulted in the omnipresence of the organisation, the cells of which were founded in all professional circles, workplaces and places of residence. However, these structures closely corresponded to the territorial division which meant that administrative and territorial level divisions matched the relevant levels of organisational structure (provincial committees, district committees, municipal committees, communal committees and gromada committees¹). On the other hand, the party's internal organisation was determined by the so-called democratic centralism, i.e. a combination of a united, centralised management based on unconditional acceptance of resolutions passed by higher instances to lower instances, a rigid discipline and the obligation to submit reports to higher instances, while at the same time declaring independent democratism of lower instances in addition to electability at all levels and the responsibility to report to voters (Tokarczyk 1998, p. 217).

The main link in party structures was the so-called instances, meaning organisation levels. In the case of PZPR, they corresponded to the levels of territorial division (central, provincial, district, municipal and communal), i.e. to committees and their members. Up until May 1975, party organisation was related to a three-level authority structure and state administration (provincial, district and communal), of which the main link was the district instances. They functioned in parallel to district authority and state administration. After the administrative reform in Poland in 1975, a new, two-level structure was introduced (province and communal level), to which the party structures adapted accordingly.

The ultimate authority in PZPR was held by the Party Convention. In between the conventions, the highest rank was granted to the Central Committee (Głowacki 1989, pp. 91–92). Its work was conducted through plenary sessions; in between the plenary sessions, the party activities were led by the Political Bureau. Selected secretaries of the Central Committee were the members of the Secretariat, which was at the head of organising, executing and controlling the Party Convention's resolutions, as well as the choice and appraisal of as well as control over the political personnel (Głowacki 1989, p. 92).

¹ Gromada—the smallest administrative unit in Poland between 1954 and 1972 (translator's note).

The highest legislative authority of territorial organisations of communist parties was the Conferences summoned every 2 years. In between the reporting and voting Conferences, the committees held superior authority over respective organisations (Głowacki 1989, p. 95).

Departments, commissions and problem teams were appointed to individual instances in order to coordinate the party's activities. Departments would group regular employees according to their specialities and working divisions within the party, whereas the activities of instances and organisations, apart from regular employees (the so-called apparatus), were based on community activists (non-regular or part-time employees) (Dziabała 1978).

When describing the organisational system of PZPR, we also encounter the term “twisted bureaucracy” (Staniszki 2009). A sovereign residing outside the country appointed its governor—the first secretary of the Central Committee of PPR/PZPR—who was supposed to lead the party structures in the direction dictated by the said sovereign. At the same time, it was a total bureaucracy. Thanks to the centralised structure, lower instances were subordinate to higher ones, and the party aimed to exercise control over every aspect of life. Throughout the whole country, the party concentrated factual legislative, executive and judiciary authority.

Research location and sources

Even though PZPR structures in the specific parts of the country were multiple copies of the same organisation modelled by top-down instructions, thanks to which the main conclusions drawn from an analysis of the bureaucratic solutions in one region could be effectively generalised to all, the specificity of the local area affected the functioning of the organisation. The field of research is the area of functioning of the PZPR Provincial Committee in Biała Podlaska, i.e. Biała Podlaska Province. It was created on 1 June 1975, and it remained unchanged until the end of communism in Poland in 1989 (Biała Podlaska Province was disestablished only after the administrative reform which came into effect on 1 January 1999).

The Province Committee of the communist party in Biała Podlaska was founded in parallel to establishing the new Biała Podlaska Province. It was one of the smallest provinces in the country at that time. It covered 5353 km² (1.7% of Poland) and was located in the central-eastern areas alongside the border with the Soviet Union. This province included six cities (Biała Podlaska, Łosice, Międzyrzec Podlaski, Parczew, Radzyń Podlaski and Terespol) as well as 35 rural communes. It was populated by 280,000 people (less than 1% of Poland's population), 69,000 of whom lived in cities. The area was largely used for farming, and it was recognised as key for food production in the country. The majority of agricultural land in the province (94%) was occupied by rather small peasant households and farms.

When it comes to PZPR organisation in this province, in 1975 it included 14,657 members and candidates operating in 862 primary party organisations led by the Province Committee, three municipal committees, three municipal–communal committees and 35 communal committees. For the communist party, the period of the most accelerated development was the years 1979 and 1980, when there were more

than 960 primary organisations. This number dropped to 900 in 1983 because of the political crisis after the creation of the solidarity movement and the introduction of the martial law, but then rose again to a steady 950 between 1987 and 1989. A similar pattern could be observed in the number of communist party members in Biała Podlaska Province—the peak being 1979 with 19,658 PZPR members and candidates. After the period of a “national rebirth” in the years 1980–1981, the number of members and candidates radically dropped and did not exceed 14,000 until the end of the 1980s which saw a drop below the level from the time before establishing the province itself. During the period of the most notable organisational development of the communist party in 1979, the percentage of party affiliation in Biała Podlaska Province was just over 7%; it dropped below 5% in 1981 and remained at this level until the end of the Polish People’s Republic. It was lower than the country’s average, which amounted to 9% in the peak period of 1980 (Magier 2008).

This research was based mainly on archival materials produced by the PZPR Province Committee in Biała Podlaska which are stored in the State Archive in Lublin, Radzyń Podlaski Branch, as well as on Polish-language literature on the subject which is quite scarce.

Party documents

The circulation of information within the structures of the communist party and at the point of contact with the outside world (as it has been mentioned—this contact was reduced to minimum) resulted in recording this information in the form of a party document. Party documents not only included internal letters, but also those received from and sent to the outside. Individual documents were accumulated during the course of particular cases (the office system of filing documents based on similarities), and, in turn, these would comprise the whole recorded documentation stored at first in individual committees, organisations and organisation cells which constituted parts of bigger party committees. The result of bureaucratic activities of the communist party structures was a very diverse documentation, despite the rule that the work of higher instances should be mirrored by the lower instances.

The office management basis for the communist party as an authority was set very early, during the times of PPR. The offices for communist party committees were a completely new creation that had no counterpart during the conspiracy phase of its existence (1918–1944). In the times of the communist party, PPR committees became quasi-state institutions which not only had to conduct correspondence and assist enquirers, but also to focus on producing documentation due to the “state-creating” responsibilities of the party. There were three main elements which affected its office work: the phenomenon of communist bureaucracy, the experience of the conspiracy period of the Polish Communist Party and of the beginning of PPR, and, finally, the lack of factual knowledge of the office workers, which resulted in office skills ineptitude (Magier 2012). Despite the fact that office activities during the reign of PPR were not unified, some bureaucratic solutions were initiated and they laid the foundations for the peculiar documentation system of PZPR.

In the following years of the communist party, it had become obvious that the documents coming into existence thanks to the functioning of the structure are an indispensable element of the activities of the organisation at that time and also a permanent testimony of its history. However, it was only in 1982 that it was first highlighted that recording their own activities is a responsibility of all party cells. It was also indicated who was responsible for the state of the documentation, as well as its creation, safety and archiving. All office employees and personnel responsible for documentation were supposed to be trained in the scope of office management and archiving. Their supervision was the responsibility of the party's local revision commissions (Horst 2006).

The following were to be documented: party activities such as all gatherings of instances, sessions of party organisations and their executives, meetings of commissions and teams appointed by instances, meetings and debates of party activists, resolutions, decisions issued by individual instances, as well as their agendas and programmes of activities, the results of their inspections and efficiency appraisals, the evaluation of the party's state of affairs and its structures, the sociopolitical evaluation and public satisfaction, and feedback from the outside (Horst 2006, p. 304). The sequence of actions was repeated on each level of PZPR organisation in provinces; hence, the production of acts in provincial, district, municipal, communal, gromada¹ and workplace office committees struck many similarities in this regard. It was especially related to the protocols of authorities' meetings, which were accompanied by the production of many different types of acts. They were as follows: reporting and voting protocols, reporting conferences protocols, plenary sessions protocols, executives sessions protocols, revision commissions sessions protocols, party control commission sessions protocols, in addition to political party liaison committee sessions protocols and ad hoc commissions and teams sessions protocols. Primary party organisations issued voting and reporting sessions protocols, general meetings protocols, as well as executives sessions protocols and, finally, statistical surveys (APLOR 609, pp. 47–50).

Apart from the collegial bodies, each committee would produce work plans, agendas, evaluations of passed resolutions and their results, studies, notes and memoranda, as well as many various acts concerning the substance of its functioning. Among other types of documentation, there were also commemorative photographs of important events and celebrations as well as sound recordings on magnetic tapes.

Apart from the aforementioned internal documentation, the structures of PZPR also produced external documentation, which was sent outside to lower instances, superiors, other organisational units and natural persons.

Financial documents were a completely separate type of documentation. They consisted of invoices, payment letters, advance payments and travel expenses reimbursements (APLOR 609, pp. 7–8). Moreover, financial documents also consisted of fixed assets registers such as inventory books (APLOR 609, pp. 13–14) and a registry of members and membership fees (APLOR 609, pp. 17–18).

The second type of documentation, apart from the financials, which are common for organisations which hire employees and apply employment policies, was personnel documentation and associated records. Staffing policies of PZPR were one of the main instruments of exercising authority by the communist party and constituted a

part of the system known as the personnel nomenclature (Magier 2009). “Cadres decide everything”, allegedly said Joseph Stalin. The entirety of personnel records was the responsibility of the province committee staff departments, and it should be borne in mind that it concerned a considerable group of people: committee members and deputy members, members of revision committees, members of the party control committee, political employees as well as employees holding positions included in the nomenclature, and the so-called workers’ movement activists, that is the veterans of the communist movement. Implementing the staffing policy required producing personnel files such as personnel file folders, registration cards, cards of employees holding positions included in the nomenclature and a registry of changes related to these positions (APLOR 609, p. 300). Personnel files of candidates and members of PZPR consisted of a questionnaire, curriculum vitae, recommendations, and a membership acceptance or withdrawal. It was usual for the files to include pieces of personal characteristics written by superiors, employee certificates, a curriculum vitae, questionnaires, various requests and even the retirement documentation (Jarosz 2011).

A separate group of files were personnel files of the veterans of the communist movement, created and collected by departments dedicated to the activists of the workers’ movement, as well as widows and orphans left after their death. As per standard, they included requests to be credited as “workers’ movement activists”, a form describing the course of their political activities and documentation of potential financial aids. Memoirs of the said activists were also added to the files.

The type of documentation which was produced by all committees and party organisations and was strictly related to personnel documentation was statistical reports about candidates and party members. They consisted of special forms designed for the whole communist party by the Organisational Department of the PZPR Central Committee. At the lowest levels, forms were filled in by workplace committees, or the smallest units of party structures, and then forwarded to higher-level committees, which were responsible for combining data and composing it into a collective report. The basis for the statistical compilation was the registry of candidates and members (APLOR 885, p. 2).

PZPR archive records and their informational content

Supervision of the documentation created by specific communist party structures was up to the network of party’s current and historical archives. They were: the Central Archive at PPR and PZPR General Authorities, with the said Archive transformed into an independent cell in 1971, treated as PZPR Central Committee department, and PPR and PZPR province archives, subordinate to it in terms of substantive matters, at the Party Province Committees. They combined the features of both current and historical archives. Their biggest challenge was to select and take over the documentation from party instances as well as to manage its disposal. This was particularly problematic because of the mass production of documents and their repetitiveness across provinces, which made it difficult to hand over documents as well as to properly archive them. The aforementioned mass production also caused issues with gathering and storing,

especially because such documentation was produced by a few dozen province committees, hundreds of local committees, thousands of communal committees and also more than a few hundred thousands of primary party organisations. It is also worth noting that communist party archives were not supervised by the state archive administration. After the self-dissolution of PZPR in January 1990, the whole documentation stored in the communist party archives was relocated to state archives and made available to the public by the decision of the Republic of Poland Council of Ministers from 19 March 1990 (Magier 2017).

This collection is not complete, especially the documentation from the most recent years of the party's existence (the second half of the 1980s), which was not archived and relocated to PZPR archives before the party's dissolution, but was kept by particular organisational structures. In this regard, the collection appears to have certain gaps. Allegedly, the documentation was to some extent intentionally destroyed between 1989 and 1990 (Laskowska 2012).

Another issue arising from working on a communist document is the language in which it was written, known as newspeak since the George Orwell era. Its main characteristics are as follows:

- (a) imposing a distinctive sign of value, the goal of which is a clear evaluation, often even more important the content itself;
- (b) a synthesis of pragmatic and ritual elements, or adapting to circumstances while maintaining traditional customs, meaning that the boundaries of a certain language cannot be crossed;
- (c) the magical nature meaning that words do not necessarily describe reality but rather are creating it, talking about something which is desired in such a way as if it were reality;
- (d) arbitrary decisions which could alter the meaning of words at any given time and play a bigger role than in a typical language (Głowiński 2009).

Another puzzle manifesting itself when reading communist party documentation is the truthfulness of its content. Comparative studies of partial texts indicate that the “improved” data, especially statistics, appear in post-war records, which, without a doubt, are the remnants of the conspiracy period of the party between 1918 and 1944. At that time, communication issues and the ephemeral nature of structures prompted some local organisations to provide data which would show them in a more favourable light. Along with the strengthening of power by the communist party in the state and the development of party bureaucracy, falsifying records was less probable and intentional.

Conveying information

Knowing the importance of information in the functioning of bureaucratic systems, especially in the area of its management aimed at achieving the greatest possible efficiency, what is quite interesting is the system of

conveying information in PZPR. The enormous party structure, covering the whole province in a dense network, definitely constituted a challenge when it came to ensuring the efficiency of standard information circulation by exercising the steps of DECISION—ORDER—ACTION—CONTROL.

The flow of information involved both oral and written pieces of information. It consisted of telexes from the Central Committee and central units to workplaces in the field, materials prepared by special forces, current news pieces from instances, party organisations and workplaces, in addition to bulletins, materials prepared by higher instances, teleconferences organised by central units and oral pieces of information from party activists. The direction of the information flow was both vertical and horizontal. On the provincial level, the information was gathered and shared by committees' organisational departments, and in districts, cities and communes—by the first secretaries of, respectively, district, municipal, municipal–communal, communal, workplace committees and primary party structures.

As far as vertical flow of information is concerned, a system was introduced which assumed three variants of procedures in conveying a political message. The classic scenario was based on the involvement of provincial lecturers; it was used in situations where a message could take longer to be received. The assumption was that province committee lecturers would organise working sessions with lecturers of municipal and communal committees at the seat of particular instances responsible for ideological affairs (centres of educational and ideological work). During such sessions, provincial lecturers would convey the relevant message. Each province lecturer was assigned specific committees; however, lecturers from the committees of basic-level instances only served individual, primary party organisational units. Lecturers would organise a meeting in a matter of a few days for selected socio-professional circles like farmers, factory workers, as well as teachers or social workers in towns or villages. Heads of ideological centres, along with a provincial lecturer who chaired the meeting, would prepare a collective report on the meeting and send it to ideological education departments of provincial committees (provincial centres of ideological education), where they were aggregated and forwarded to the relevant secretary of a provincial committee.

If a message required a shorter lead time, up to a maximum of a few days, secretaries of provincial committees would convey it to provincial centres of ideological education, which in turn would contact lower-level committees to agree on a meeting schedule. Provincial committee lecturers would be sent to these meetings, which would take place in regular places of lecture and contact, in cities, towns, communes and workplaces. They were places where local municipal, communal or workplace party activists would usually gather. The persons responsible for these meetings were the first secretaries of local committees or the secretaries of workplace committees or other primary party units who directly reported to the aforementioned first secretaries. Province committee lecturers would forward the information about the meetings to provincial centres of party activities, which in turn would gather it and send a collective report to secretaries of province committees.

In special circumstances, when there was a need to reach the lowest party units, villages, workplaces and party circles in 1 day, secretaries of province committees would use the telephone to summon political employees and province activists

responsible for specific administrative units. Not only the employees of province committees and province communist activists were invited; depending on the need, members of the executive of provincial committees and representatives of socio-political organisational bodies would also be asked to join. While the meeting on a provincial level was taking place, provincial committee administration would phone the first secretaries of lower-level committees about the need to call a meeting of activists responsible for relevant party units at specific times and in specific places. Straight after the end of provincial meetings, their participants would go into assigned destinations of meetings in the field in order to have discussions with municipal and communal level activists and convey the message received during the provincial meetings. Consequently, the municipal and communal level activists would be responsible for reaching the lowest level party units they were assigned to and acquaint them with the relevant information.

Provincial activists also had to take part in the proceedings of primary party organisations (each of them in at least one) and remain in the field up until there was clear confirmation that all planned meetings had taken place. Afterwards, all party municipal and communal activists had to return to their respective committees and immediately prepare an appropriate report concerning the proceedings of meetings in which they had participated. Then, this information would be sent to relevant departments of provincial committees. In turn, the said departments would aggregate all pieces of information to form a full report which was then submitted to the respective secretaries of provincial committees (APLOR 117, pp. 94–95).

When it comes to information intended for higher instances, it was scheduled that on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays until 9 a.m. (or, in case a crisis should occur, more often), all PZPR committees throughout provinces were supposed to send a telex or phone the organisational departments of provincial committees about the current sociopolitical situation. The messages were supposed to be about political moods in individual socio-professional circles, current affairs, as well as symptoms of public dissatisfaction, questions or queries raised by local workers or society circles, in addition to rumours, requests or suggestions regarding current party activities. After the formation of an opposition in the second half of the 1970s and following the political and economic crisis in the 1980s, there was also an interest in rumours, performances, leaflets, slogans or various other materials which could be qualified as hostile towards the communist party. Hence, the task of the instance of the first level was not only to ensure that materials and information are quickly secured and transferred from the authorities to basic party organisations and workplaces, but also that current information was communicated to appropriate higher instances on an ongoing basis. Special sectors of organisational departments of province committees would draft (select and aggregate) these data to create a report, and if accepted on a provincial level, it would then be sent to the Central Committee of PZPR (APLOR 145, pp. 29–31).

Notices concerning conveying information during moments of sociopolitical crises appearing in documents are not incidental since the crises in communist Poland would arise periodically. In an inefficient economy, so typical for the communist political system, public dissatisfaction caused by people's poor financial situation was easily instigated. This was the basis for the political crises in Poland in June

1956, then in December 1970, in June 1976, and finally in July and August of 1980. However, the unstable economic situation in Poland was merely partly a slogan, partly a symbol underneath which there was a hidden aversion held by a part of the society to the system forced by the Soviet Union. In Poland, workers' solidarity—which was manifested by requesting to reinstate workers previously removed for having been involved in unions independent from the regime—and prices rises and shortages of meat, work clothing and cigarettes were merely a pretext for a political crisis. In an inefficient economy, price increases and shortages of goods constituted a standby excuse for public outbursts. In the summer of 1980, when the "Solidarity" movement was founded during general workers' strikes, the crisis hit in its more powerful form. When the "Solidarity" organisation reached 10 million members (many of them communist party members), it transcended the formula of a trade union and started becoming competition to the communist centre of power and as such—as the communists feared—could claim to overthrow the state. That is what caused the state to introduce martial law on 13 December 1981, which in turn pacified solidarity movements and froze the process of changes for almost a decade.

During the crisis of 1980–1981, the information flow system was supplemented by adding province committee propaganda divisions, which was explained by the fact that the crisis is being used by "political enemies of socialism in order to stir up hostility towards the authorities and to raise doubt about official information" (APLOR 117, p. 25).

In Biała Podlaska Province, an information and propaganda rapid response team was organised as a part of the information flow system. It was led by the propaganda secretary of the PZPR Province Committee and it was composed of, among others: the Head of the Department of Ideological-Educational Work, the Head of the Provincial Centre of Ideological Education and the director of the Organisational Department. Such groups were responsible for general coordination, forecasting and determining the direction of propaganda activities and overall supervision of the form and substance of any actions in this respect. Rapid response teams supervised expert teams which consisted of the Biała Podlaska Province Committee apparatus, as well as the members of the party's active core at the province level, who were in charge of specific operations and subgroups, such as:

1. The team assigned to leaflets, slogans and information publications:
 - drafting the content of leaflets, slogans, etc.,
 - deciding on their form, intended audience, methods of creation and distribution.
2. The team assigned to agitation:
 - establishing province and municipal activist groups,
 - preparing these groups in terms of methodology and substance for giving presentations in specific socio-professional circles
 - directing individual persons or activist groups, depending on the situation, to the selected circles.
3. Teams assigned to radio broadcasting systems and telex connections:

- studying current information and materials to be used in radio broadcasting systems and propaganda cars,
- organising and supervising the methods and forms of the use of propaganda materials in the mainstream media,
- improving on the ways of conveying information to workplaces, cities and communes.

4. Organisation team:

- securing the printing process and copying propaganda information,
- improving on methods of its quick delivery to individual committees,
- establishing and organising distribution groups to put up slogans, drop leaflets, etc.,
- securing means of transport for propaganda groups and activists.

Primary level instances were obliged to appoint agitation teams consisting of people with “distinctive public speaking abilities observed during gatherings and rallies” (APLOR 117, pp. 25–28).

In Biała Podlaska, the communist party owned three cars with designated drivers used for distributing written materials. They would serve all first level instances which functioned in this province. One car would be assigned 12 communal committees on the eastern side of the province in the order of the communes’ location on the route; the second car would be responsible for 14 municipal, municipal–communal and communal committees in the southwest area of the province; and the third one would in turn be responsible for 13 northern municipal and municipal–communal committees, including the city of Biała Podlaska (APLOR 117, pp. 33–34).

When it came to sending information outside the bureaucratic system of PZPR (usually for propaganda), the communist party, apart from the state apparatus, had many options at their disposal, such as its own publishing, a radio broadcasting system in workplaces, visual propaganda in the form of posters, leaflets, etc., and, finally, word-of-mouth propaganda (APLOR 544).

Conclusion

The local organisational network of PZPR known as party province organisations, beginning with a province committee, through district, municipal, communal and gromada committees, up to primary party organisations, formed an enormous bureaucratic system which, in bigger provinces, could include even a few thousands activists, involved to a smaller or greater extent in shaping the life of the society, distributing information and producing documentation about the functioning of the party. The efficiency of that system required work based on detailed instructions on how to record information on a data carrier and send it further between different the components of the system. As a result, these regulations and the practical aspects of the functioning of the organisation were essential to the party’s efficiency in the system in which it was the key operational entity. What remains of this sphere is a vast collection of PPR/PZPR documentation stored in Polish state archives.

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