


ARTICLE

Subversive Modernity: Popular Institutions and Peasant Autobiographies in Poland at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Over the recent years, Polish historiography has experienced a noteworthy “people’s turn.” Regrettably, these works tend to reinforce stereotypes that portray the peasantry as a politically inert “mass.” The objective of this paper is to challenge this portrayal of the Polish peasantry as a largely passive majority lacking effective means of contestation. To accomplish this, I delve into an analysis of peasant self-organization during the turn of the early twentieth century in Galicia and the Kingdom of Poland. My investigation is based on a micro-historical approach, drawing upon autobiographies authored by activists engaged in rural cooperatives written in the initial decades after World War II. The cited autobiographies provide plenty of specific evidence regarding plebeian collective agency. By juxtaposing the political perspectives of modern institutions with the vernacular categories of actors within specific historical circumstances, I aim to ground theoretical conclusions in an asynchronous and subversive vision of modernity.

Keywords: autobiography; asynchronicity; cooperatives; modernity; people’s history

The influential Polish philosopher Andrzej Leder recently called for the writing in Poland of an “unwritten epic,” a work that would represent the “the powerful emancipatory current” in Polish history, “the personification of a slow but unstoppable breaking out from social, material, political, and ultimately mental enslavement.”¹ What he had in mind was a move analogous to earlier attempts by western scholars to present social history from the perspective of the popular classes, which in a country like Poland with a strongly

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¹ Andrzej Leder, “Nienapisana epopeja: Kilka uwag o zapomnianym wyzwoleniu,” *Teksty drugie* 6 (January 2017): 56. Leder is the author of a book that has had a significant impact on the Polish debate on modernity. In this volume he attempted to explain the changes that occurred in the cultural consciousness of Poles, brought about by the “revolution” of 1939–56, or the years of World War II and the beginning of the Stalinist regime, which completely transformed the previous social divisions, removing the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the Jews, and in their place creating new elites. *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej* (Warsaw, 2014).

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agrarian socio-economic structure would mean turning first to the history of the peasant masses.²

The rising tide of “people’s histories” in Poland in recent years has been inspired by the global history of exploited groups.³ Polish historians, however, have modeled their work mainly on British and American people’s histories in the style of Howard Zinn or on “resistance studies” closer to James C. Scott, turning only rarely to authors from outside the sphere of western culture.⁴ This is despite the fact that, as I will try to show, historiographies stemming from the Global South would very likely prove helpful in the study of subjugated groups in the Global East—a region gaining increasing visibility among researchers.⁵

The declared aim of works such as Adam Leszczyński’s *Ludowa Historia Polski* (A People’s History of Poland) or Kacper Pobłocki’s *Chamstwo* (Rabble) was both to show the structural violence of serfdom, which underpinned Polish statehood, and to “give voice to the people,” showing them as active agents who created their own culture and subjectivity under conditions of serfdom.⁶ This effort to diversify the mythologized image of the humble multitudes as cogs in the machinery of exploitation (first feudal, then capitalist) also sought to break with two Polish historiographical traditions. On the one hand, it represented a break with the historiography practiced under state Marxism, which focused on the genesis and structure of class consciousness in the peasantry.⁷ On the other hand, it was a departure from the national history that prevailed in Poland after the collapse of communism, one based largely on chronicling the “nobles’ democracy” that existed in Poland until the eighteenth century.⁸

While the first aim was certainly fulfilled—the books mentioned above are filled with descriptions of the misery and bestial violence suffered by the peasantry at the hands of the nobility—the second aim proved much more problematic. The problem here was not a scarcity of adequate archival material providing an unadulterated picture of history as seen through the eyes of the oppressed, but the fact that the activity of the peasants was

² In the Polish lands divided by the three powers of Austria, Prussia and Russia in the eighteenth century, serfdom was not nominally abolished until the nineteenth century: in the Austrian partition in 1848 after a peasant revolt known as the “Galician Slaughter” of 1846, in the Prussian partition in the period 1808–50 through a series of ordinances, and finally in the Russian partition in 1864 in response to the bloody events of the “January Uprising.” However, the economic dependence of peasants farming small plots of land continued in many places of the country until WWII. See Emil Niederhauser, *The Emancipation of the Serfs in Eastern Europe* (Boulder, 2004). More about serfdom in historical Poland: Kamil Janicki, *Pańszczyzna: Prawdziwa historia polskiego niewolnictwa* (Poznań, 2021).

³ The wave of “Polish people’s history” includes, among others: Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski: Historia wyzysku i oporu: Mitologia panowania* (Warsaw, 2020); Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* (Wołowiec, 2021); Michał Rauszer, *Siła podporządkowanych* (Warsaw, 2021); Janicki, *Pańszczyzna*; Jan Wasiewicz, *Pamięć-chłopi-bunt: Transdyscyplinarne badania nad chłopskim dziedzictwem* (Warsaw, 2021); Michał Narożniak, *Niewolnicy modernizacji: Między pańszczyzną a kapitalizmem* (Warsaw, 2021); Anna Wylęgała, *Był dwór, nie ma dworu: Reforma rolna w Polsce* (Wołowiec, 2022); Mateusz Wyżga, *Chłostwo: Historia bez krawata* (Kraków, 2022); Michał Rauszer, *Ludowy antyklerykalizm: Nieopowiedziana historia* (Kraków, 2023); Ryszard Jamka, *Panów pilą: Trzy legendy o Jakubie Szeli* (Warsaw, 2023); Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* (Warsaw, 2023), and several others. More about Polish “people’s history”: Agata Zysiak, “We the People?,” *Slavic Review* 82, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 184–93.

⁴ Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski*, 562; Rauszer, *Siła podporządkowanych*, 15.

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), chapter 4; Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories, Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, 2000); Martin Müller, “In Search of the Global East: Thinking Between North and South,” *Geopolitics* 25, no. 3 (October 2018): 734–55.

⁶ Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski*, 15.

⁷ Rafał Stobiecki, *Historiografia PRL: Zamiast podręcznika* (Łódź, 2020), also: Maciej Górny, *The Nation Should Come First: Marxism and Historiography in East Central Europe*, trans. Antoni Górny (Frankfurt am Main, 2013).

⁸ Jacek Wijaczka, “Historiografia polska epoki wczesnonowoczesnej po 1989 r. Próba oceny,” *Historyka Studia metodologiczne* 47 (2017): 7–75.

portrayed almost exclusively in negative and reactive terms.⁹ The author of *A People's History of Poland* was unable to avoid portraying the people as a silent majority devoid of political agency and subjected to the top-down power of the lords. This “romantic-insurgent” vision suggests that the people, when driven to the extreme, could only unleash bloody rebellions, chaotic riots, or, at best, uncoordinated strikes that did not lead to permanent change.¹⁰

Polish historians thereby lost sight of an integral part of the complex history of peasantry in the modern period: the formation of institutions of collective action. This led *à rebours* to a rejection of the legacy of modernization (treated as an ideology of capitalism), while maintaining a specific version of historicism within which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has brilliantly demonstrated, the people are “always not yet” ready for political action.¹¹ Within this vision, modernization and the political are equated (in the fashion of the western bourgeois public sphere); meanwhile, a rejection of the former results in the disappearance of the latter in relation to the activity of the people.

Recent studies of popular classes' everyday life continue to uphold a historiosophical model that leads from backwardness to development, from feudalism to capitalism, and consequently from political pre-modernity to modernity.¹² In decolonizing efforts to redefine historiographical discourse in Poland, the concept of “people's history” holds special significance, serving both as a scholarly topic and a key element in the contemporary liberal-left discourse.¹³ Authors of such works look at the social life of the peasantry through a modern lens, and, despite the sympathy they may have for the object of their research, they often overlook the peasantry's potential as a causal force with the ability to shape the conditions of its own political existence. This perspective does not significantly diverge from the narratives about peasants and workers that were prevalent in Poland during the capitalist transformation of the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁴

What is also surprising is the total omission of the phenomenon of rural cooperatives. As autonomous associations of persons united by a voluntary bond to meet common economic and social needs, cooperatives constituted, according to the rural economic historian Maria Halamska, one of the most important institutions for the self-organization of the people.¹⁵ Nor do we find in the aforementioned works a broader discussion of the peasant roots of the powerful movements centered in the early twentieth century around the periodical *Zaranie* (The Dawn) and the Polish People's Union (Polski Związek Ludowy), which provided

⁹ Wyżga, *Chłoptwo*, 25–27.

¹⁰ This image of the indolence of the peasantry in building stable political institutions correlates with the “black legend” of the peasant revolts of the nineteenth century, particularly the “Galician Slaughter” of 1846 and its leader Jakub Szela, which is also reproduced by people's historians. They justify the killings of the nobles by the peasants, pointing to the hard conditions of serfdom, but also confirm the despotic and bloody image of Szela as a “peasant bully”: Jamka, *Panów piłą*, 360.

¹¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 15.

¹² On the problem of backwardness and modernization in economic debates about eastern Europe: Daniel Chirot, ed., *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe: Economics and Politics from the Middle Ages until Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1989); Jacek Kochanowicz, *Backwardness and Modernization: Poland and Eastern Europe in the 16th–20th Centuries* (Aldershot, Eng., 2006). More specifically about Polish economic history: Anna Sosnowska, *Explaining Economic Backwardness: Post-1945 Polish Historians on Eastern Europe* (Budapest, 2019).

¹³ Tomasz Zarycki, *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe* (Hoboken, NJ, 2014), 111–12.

¹⁴ Michał Buchowski, “The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 469.

¹⁵ Maria Halamska, *Wieś polska 1918–2018: W poszukiwaniu źródeł teraźniejszości* (Warsaw, 2020), 81; see also: Torsten Lorenz, “Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflicts: Introduction,” in Torsten Lorenz, ed., *Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflicts: Eastern Europe in the 19th and Early 20th Century* (Berlin, 2007), 9–44; Kai Struve, “Civil Society, Peasants, and Nationalism in Austrian Galicia,” in Milan Řepa, ed., *Peasants into Citizens: The Politicization of Rural Areas in East Central Europe (1861–1914)* (Wiesbaden, 2020), 11–38.

an ideological and political base for the development of the Polish agrarian movement.¹⁶ The *Wici* Union of the Rural Youth of the Republic of Poland (Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej Wici), which in 1939 united more than 100,000 left-wing young people of rural origin referred directly to the heritage of *The Dawn*.¹⁷ Initiatives of this kind do not appear in recent “people’s history” in Poland in either political, organizational, or geographical terms.

The present study aims to broaden our understanding of peasant agency and to address this research gap by closely examining the institutionalization of peasant collective action. I will analyze the popular institutions through the lens of the grassroots peasant activists who were involved in their operation, rather than relying on grand ideological narratives (often written by academically trained leaders) or statistical data (which relate them to external political and economic norms). Thus, I will focus on analyzing the autobiographical narratives of peasants involved in building cooperativism and a rural political movement in the Polish lands from the late nineteenth century to the outbreak of WWII. This analysis will allow me to show the history of modern peasant institutions through the trajectory of the lives of the peasants themselves, uncovering a “plebeian public sphere,” constructed in a very different way from those supported by the elegant salons of the *belle époque* or those whose members carried the banners promoting proletarian revolution.¹⁸

The basic methodological premise of this paper will be linking biographical research and the history of social institutions. I propose replacing the abstract model used by historians to project a modern trajectory with a “grounded” approach based on research into specific peasant biographies, presenting a “layered accumulation” of historical meaning.¹⁹ My inquiries are part of a rich tradition of biographical research aimed at reconstructing the histories of popular classes and subaltern groups in different parts of the world. They are inspired by previous research on peasant memoirs growing primarily out of the classical studies of William I. Thomas, Florian Znaniecki, and Józef Chałasiński, but also drawing from contemporary labor, postcolonial, and feminist studies on biographies of the subaltern.²⁰ The focus on the memoirs of peasant cooperative activists is intended to provide a local perspective on the global processes of modern institution-building and to enable an examination of these processes through the lens of their local incarnations.

¹⁶ Wiesław Piątkowski, *Idee agrarne ugrupowań politycznych w Królestwie Polskim w latach 1892–1918* (Łódź, 1992), 126–39; Halina Trocka, *Spółdzielczość w programach i polityce polskich stronnictw ludowych do roku 1939* (Warsaw, 1969), 31–46.

¹⁷ *Mały rocznik statystyczny* (Warsaw, 1939), 351.

¹⁸ A classical approach to “plebeian public sphere:” Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience: Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labnyi, Jamie O. Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis, 1993); see also Craig Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism: Tradition, the Public Sphere, and Early Nineteenth-Century Social Movements* (Chicago, 2012); in Polish context: Wiktor Marzec, *Rising Subjects: The 1905 Revolution and the Genesis of the Polish Public Sphere* (Pittsburgh, 2020).

¹⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, trans. Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford, 2015).

²⁰ Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge, Eng., 2012); Samraghni Bonnerjee, ed., *Subaltern Women’s Narratives: Strident Voices, Dissenting Bodies* (London, 2021); Józef Chałasiński, *Młode pokolenie chłopów: Procesy i zagadnienia kształtowania się warstwy chłopskiej w Polsce*, 4 vols. (Warsaw, 1938); Sandra Dahlke, Nikolaus Katzer, and Denis Sdvizhkov, eds., *Revolutionary Biographies in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Imperial-Inter/national-Decolonial* (Leiden, 2024); Gyanendra Pandey, “Voices from the Edge: The Struggle to Write Subaltern,” in Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London, 2008), 281–99; James R. Simmons Jr., ed., *Factory Lives: Four Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiographies* (Peterborough, ON, 2007); William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 5 vols. (Boston, 1918–1920); a plenty of books by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, for example their volume *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography* (Minneapolis, 1992); David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom. A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography* (New York, 1981).

In order to fulfill these aims, I will rely on memoirs written for competitions organized by the Institute of Social Economy (Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego), an independent think-tank operating in interwar Poland.²¹ Most of the memoirs I will use, however, were written in the 1960s as part of a competition organized by peasant and cooperative institutions, especially the National Cooperative Council (Krajowa Rada Spółdzielcza), and sanctioned by state authorities.²² Thus, their content was unquestionably shaped by the propaganda of the ruling party, which emphasized the impact of communism on the awareness of the peasantry. Yet these peasant memoirs likewise express a sense of social marginalization and economic debasement, reflecting the social situation of the peasantry in prewar Poland. One would therefore have to assume that the memoirists used the official language of the era to tell their own story and express their own beliefs, frequently constructing their own message, one that was subversive to the top-down rules.²³ We find more components in this language than just communist propaganda.

My research is based on an examination of nearly thirty memoirs of varying lengths and political profiles, covering the period 1900–39. In analyzing the autobiographical narratives of peasant activists, I would like to focus on those moments—both in the content of these narratives and in their construction—which will allow me to reconstruct the birth of the political consciousness of a “democratic subject,” one whose history does not fit into a simple distinction between pre-modern and modern forms of articulation. In this way, the political ceases to be a deductive presupposition or a substantive property that pre-exists a specific time and is embodied under specific historical conditions in a given social class.²⁴ Rather, it is realized in a continuum, becoming visible in the biographies of individuals, where heterogeneous factors are involved, including those related to the structure of a given society, the economic development, or cultural and religious issues.

Modernization thus ceases to be a set of top-down ideas and concepts and becomes instead a form of direct experience. It pulls individuals who are socially advancing out of the pre-modern world, but is realized by them in local and accidental versions. As Wiktor Marzec and Agata Zysiak put it: “This allows us to maintain sensitivity to local specificities resulting from the global positionality of the region and the widespread feeling of inferiority, lack, and oppression, having tangible consequences.”²⁵ This asynchronous image of modernization describes the situation of social actors who confront the global narratives of modernity, creatively taking them up and translating them into their own, “minor” political language.

Thus, historical analysis of the people’s agency also allows us to revise claims about the chronic underdevelopment of central and eastern Europe not only in economic but also political terms.²⁶ We also avoid the problem of the “great discrepancy” between the west European version of formalized and stable forms of the common good, realized

²¹ Ludwik Krzywicki, ed., *Pamiętniki chłopów: nr 1–51* (Warsaw, 1935); more about the Institute: Tadeusz Szturm de Sztrem, *Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego 1920–1944* (Warsaw, 1959).

²² I refer mainly to the memories collected in: *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 5 vols. (Warsaw, 1963–73) and other diaries from the archive of the National Cooperative Council.

²³ Wiktor Marzec, “Working Out Socialism: Labor and Politics in Socialist Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Poland,” *Autobiography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2020): 372.

²⁴ Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994). I am referring here also to the meaning of politics as the possibility of apparition within the historical conditions of visibility, proposed by Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York, 2010).

²⁵ Agata Zysiak and Wiktor Marzec, “Historicizing the Asynchronous Modernity in the Global East,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 61, no. 6 (2020): 672.

²⁶ Izabela Bukraba-Rylska, “Przedsiębiorczość społeczna w Polsce dwudziestolecia międzywojennego—przykłady,” in Tomasz Kaźmierczak and Marek Rymśza, eds., *Kapitał społeczny: Ekonomia społeczna* (Warsaw, 2007): 127–74.

through modern institutions, and the east European version, with the much less organized, immature and unstable forms of grassroots resistance undertaken by the subaltern.²⁷

“Lifting the peasantry out of darkness and poverty”

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the countryside of the Kingdom of Poland, the western frontier of the Russian empire, and Galicia, which was the north-easternmost province of the Habsburg empire (and former lands of Poland), were among the poorest areas in the whole of Europe.²⁸ The agrarian population and property structures in the former Polish lands were undergoing major transformations as a result of both the partitioning of certain landed estates after the abolition of serfdom, and from increased pressure from industry to provide cheap labor in the form of landless peasants, giving the rural economy a checkerboard-like structure.²⁹ The Kingdom and Galicia stood in stark contrast to the Prussian Poznań Province, which constituted the third segment of the erstwhile Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and was presently integrated into the German empire, where agrarian enfranchisement reforms had been carried out much earlier. In a comparative analysis, the Prussian partition emerges triumphant here, displaying superior outcomes in terms of agricultural productivity, livestock breeding, and the surplus value of agricultural yields.³⁰ While the Kingdom and Galicia grappled with analogous socio-economic challenges, the distinction between them becomes pronounced in the latter's agrarian landscape. Notably, more than 80% of the total agrarian structure in Galicia was comprised of small farms. Concurrently, a disconcerting over-proliferation of labor ensued. Furthermore, despite the emancipation of peasants subsequent to the upheavals of 1848, numerous medium-sized farms found themselves ill-equipped to contend with the competitive onslaught posed by the enduring dominance of large estates, which persisted under the stewardship of the nobility.³¹

Władysław Kisała, a peasant cooperative activist born in Kraczkowa, a small village in the Galician Podkarpacie region, recalled his childhood in the countryside: “Decades had passed since the abolition of serfdom, yet illiteracy, darkness and deadness still prevailed in the countryside. People lived day by day, each for themselves, individually. Great poverty reigned.”³² Peasants from the Kingdom of Poland perceived their situation in the same way. Władysław Cholewa, born in the village of Bełczac near Radzyń Podlaski, recalled with irony the official data on local agriculture: “If my father, a 17-morg farmer, could not buy shoes for his children, if we walked in clothes made of homemade linen, if my older brothers worked in the manor almost all their time, then today's statistics include this type of farmer among the rural rich.”³³ Under these conditions, the development of various forms of agricultural

²⁷ Miguel L. Pemán and Tine De Moor, “A Tale of Two Commons: Some Preliminary Hypotheses on the Long-term Development of the Commons in Western and Eastern Europe, 11th–19th centuries,” *International Journal of the Commons* 7, no. 1 (2013): 7–33.

²⁸ Uwe Müller, “‘Nachzügler’ im Industrialisierungsprozess und ‘Semiperipherie’ in einer sich globalisierenden Ökonomie? Transnationale Verflechtungen in der ostmitteleuropäischen Wirtschaft des 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 55, no. 1 (2014): 9–32; see also classical work about poverty of Galicia by Stanisław Szczepanowski, economist and petroleum entrepreneur—*Nędza Galicyi w cyfrach i program energicznego rozwoju gospodarstwa krajowego* (Lviv, 1888).

²⁹ Regina Chomać, *Struktura agrarna Królestwa Polskiego na przełomie XIX i XX wieku* (Warsaw, 1970); see also classical work on this topic: Wincenty Gortat, *Góra Baldrzychowska i Byczyna: opis porównawczy wsi na gruntach scalonych i wsi mającej szachownicę* (Warsaw, 1928).

³⁰ Stefan Kieniewicz, *The Emancipation of the Polish Peasantry* (Chicago, 1969), 222.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

³² *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, vol. 1, 308.

³³ National Cooperative Council Archive, file D-3285, 1 (Władysław Cholewa, *Wspomnienia z pracy w spółdzielczości rolniczej w latach 1923–39*).

associations, community shops, or people's banks became the only means of development that the authors of memoirs from this period considered reasonable. "These organizations were supposed to lift the peasantry out of darkness and misery," wrote Cholewa.³⁴

A part of the peasantry, influenced by radical social reformers such as Father Stanisław Stojalowski or Bolesław Wyslouch, both active in Galicia at the turn of the century, started a wide educational campaign concerning the peasantry's civil rights and economic situation.³⁵ Many memories from Galicia evoke the significance of the rural school system in shaping the development of the local peasantry. This system, which had been evolving since the times of the Republic of Kraków and had undergone reforms following the establishment of national autonomy, played a crucial role in addressing the issue of illiteracy.³⁶ Despite a gradual decrease in the number of illiterates, the pace was impeded by a limited school infrastructure, the peasantry's distrust of state institutions, and absenteeism resulting from agricultural responsibilities.³⁷ However, access to education in Polish began to exert a growing impact on the development of the rural economy. The official school system, oriented towards conservative content and faithful submission, exhibited shortcomings.³⁸ These were counteracted by grassroots self-education initiatives, exemplified by organizations such as the People's Teachers' Society (Towarzystwo Nauczycielstwa Ludowego) in Nowy Sącz and the People's School Society (Towarzystwo Oświaty Ludowej) with its solidarist-national profile. The latter aimed to facilitate the establishment of schools in economically disadvantaged villages through low-interest loans and organizational activities.³⁹

In the Kingdom of Poland during the same period, the role of various self-education initiatives, usually spearheaded by the radical intelligentsia and peasant activists, was even more significant due to the imposition of Russification and the infrastructural inadequacies plaguing public education. Consequently, some researchers write about the creation of a "network" of educational activists in these regions.⁴⁰ Organizations like the Polish People's Union, swiftly banned, the nationalist *Polska Macierz Szkolna*, along with the leftist *Zaranie* (The Dawn) and *Siewba* (Sowing) movements played a crucial role in politically radicalizing the Kingdom's peasantry.⁴¹ Furthermore, they positively affected the peasantry's market presence.⁴² The popular agricultural schools, such as those run by the *Zaranie* movement in Otrębusy (Pszczelin) or Krasienin in the Lublin region, not only focused on improving agro-beekeeping skills but also conducted clandestine socio-political education.⁴³

Despite the parallels with the situation in Galicia, the political events of the early twentieth century brought slight changes to the policy of the tsarist regime toward the countryside. These changes significantly influenced the economic situation of the Polish peasantry in this region. Although at first the peasantry did not actively participate in the events of the workers' revolution of 1905, organizing almost exclusively peaceful strikes demanding improvements in the wages and working conditions of agricultural workers, in the following months a radicalization of moods and the emergence of political slogans began. The autumn of 1905 brought an almost open rebellion of *gmina* assemblies against

³⁴ Ibid., 1.

³⁵ Helena Brodowska, *Chłopi o sobie i o Polsce* (Warsaw, 1984), 31.

³⁶ Stanisław Michalski, ed., *Dzieje szkolnictwa i oświaty na wsi polskiej do 1918*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1982), 261.

³⁷ Jerzy Potoczny, *Od alfabetyzacji do popularyzacji wiedzy* (Rzeszów, 1993), 11.

³⁸ Michalski, *Dzieje szkolnictwa i oświaty na wsi polskiej*, 273.

³⁹ Potoczny, *Od alfabetyzacji do popularyzacji wiedzy*, 64.

⁴⁰ Brodowska, *Chłopi o sobie i o Polsce*, 29.

⁴¹ Michalski, *Dzieje szkolnictwa i oświaty na wsi polskiej*, 151.

⁴² Robert E. Blobaum, "To Market! To Market! The Polish Peasantry in the Era of the Stolypin Reforms," *Slavic Review* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 411–12.

⁴³ Michalski, *Dzieje szkolnictwa i oświaty na wsi polskiej*, 217.

tsarist rule, expressed in demands to replace the Russian bureaucracy with Polish local self-government.⁴⁴ Although this mainly concerned urban centers, it also left its imprint on rural communities; strikes affected some 740–750 manors in the Kingdom and Podlasie, and there were struggles over the regulation of forest commons (*serwituty*) and pastures, for which the peasants competed with the nobility after the abolition of serfdom.⁴⁵

Although the period following 1907, known as the “Stolypin reaction,” brought about severe political repression of radical political groups in the Kingdom of Poland, its flip side entailed rather audacious and comprehensive agrarian reforms. Notably, these reforms did not extend to provinces east of the Kingdom to an equally substantial degree. The primary objectives of these reforms were, on the one hand, to fortify the presence of peasants in the burgeoning free market and, on the other, to attenuate a nationalist mobilization in the Polish countryside.⁴⁶ A corollary of this policy was the perpetuation of the intimate relationship between peasants and the Russian empire (a reconciliation that transpired subsequent to enfranchisement in 1862). Simultaneously, it bolstered the “autonomy” of the peasant class, thereby facilitating the continued evolution of peasant organizations—in the form of both parties and rural institutions engaged in collective endeavors. An instrumental outcome of the revolution was the reinstatement of the Polish language as the mandatory medium of instruction in elementary schools, thereby incentivizing vast numbers of peasants to partake in universal education.⁴⁷ Over the course of the decade spanning from 1904 to 1914, the number of primary schools in the Kingdom witnessed a substantial increase, rising from 2,977 to 4,977.⁴⁸

The tsarist regime was also forced to liberalize the law on associations, which opened the way for a luxuriant flowering of grassroots initiatives by workers and peasants.⁴⁹ The emerging organizations filled the modernization gap that had appeared in peasant communities after the end of serfdom. The peasant activists of this period were well aware that the role of cooperatives was bigger than just improving the agricultural economy and acting as a self-defense mechanism against exploitation. In his memoirs, Fijałkowski, a cooperative activist from Piotrków Trybunalski (central Poland), and then a people’s movement activist, wrote about the role of dairy cooperatives, which increased their profitability and sped up dairy production, relieving the peasant’s workload. “Taken together, all this has resulted in higher farm income, the improved well-being of the peasant family, a clearer view of the world, and an understanding of the value of better farm work, as well as, a different—more confident—social stance of the peasant-farmer.”⁵⁰ Fijałkowski undoubtedly adopted the official propaganda language of the Communist Party (ruling in Poland after 1945) to make his memoirs more up-to-date and universal, but this does not make his discourse insincere or instrumental. As a long-time promoter and organizer of co-operatives in the countryside, he saw them as one of the most important tools for economic modernization, and thus for the political emancipation of the peasantry, independent of the state.⁵¹

Despite the efforts of cooperative advocates within the emerging peasant movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the sympathies of some rural residents, the peasantry initially remained distrustful of this phenomenon. Although the agrarian circle shop in Kraczkowa village, located on the northeastern fringes of the Austro-Hungarian

⁴⁴ Robert E. Blobaum, *Rewolucja: Russian Poland, 1904–1907* (Ithaca, 1995), 115.

⁴⁵ Jan Borkowski, *Chłopi polscy w dobie kapitalizmu* (Warsaw, 1981), 95–96.

⁴⁶ Blobaum, “To Market! To Market! The Polish Peasantry in the Era of the Stolypin Reforms,” 425.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 413.

⁴⁸ Michalski, *Dzieje szkolnictwa i oświaty na wsi polskiej*, 425.

⁴⁹ Stefan Inglot, ed., *Zarys historii polskiego ruchu spółdzielczego. Część I do 1918 r.* (Warsaw, 1971), 259.

⁵⁰ National Cooperative Council Archive, file D-2228 (Władysław Fijałkowski, *Pamiętnik*, [Warsaw, 1975]), 282.

⁵¹ Craig Ireland, *The Subaltern Appeal to Experience: Self-Identity, Late Modernity, and the Politics of Immediacy* (Montreal, 2004), chapter 4.

empire, brought direct material benefits to those involved and, as Władysław Kisała referred to it, served as “an elementary school of commerce,” its establishment required significant financial contributions from impoverished smallholders. Nevertheless, the shop was set up. “At the beginning, however, it had more opponents than supporters, because all the existing traders and innkeepers kept exhorting the people not to buy in our shop,” Kisała recalled.⁵² The association’s activities thus both threatened the interests of the local landlords—nobles, innkeepers, private entrepreneurs—and challenged established beliefs and customs. The stereotype was so strong that the involvement of the peasantry in the building of cooperative organizations grew very slowly in Galicia and the Kingdom. Nevertheless, as we read in many accounts, peasants who managed to join cooperatives quickly became convinced that these organizations provided favorable working conditions and simultaneously served their interests.⁵³ Belonging to a collective gave, as it were, a new identity to its members, allowing them to begin seeing their individual work in the context of more universal demands for the improvement of the economic situation of the peasantry.

The authors of the memoirs from the early twentieth century often return to what they considered one of the most important economic achievements in the countryside, namely, the independence of the peasantry from quick credit at high interest, which they considered usury (*lichwa*).⁵⁴ “They were getting poorer all of them, ... some more, some less. They were convinced that this was by the will of God, which man could not oppose—so they had been taught in church. Usury triumphed (Władysław Kisała).”⁵⁵ People’s activists saw their salvation in popularizing small people’s banks, called *Kasy Stefczyka* (Stefczyk’s Funds) in honor of Franciszek Stefczyk, an organizer of the first cooperatives of this kind in Galicia.⁵⁶ *Stefczyk’s Funds* operated under the organizational model of German social reformer Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen—and were suitable for small farms because they did not require large capital outlays from their members.⁵⁷

The fund became a great boon—especially for smallholder farms—because it also provided loans to people who had not yet obtained a loan anywhere... Even if they were to obtain a loan, they would have been finished off by the interest, which, before the fund was established, sometimes amounted to 104% per annum, while only 7% was charged at the fund.⁵⁸

Since the creation of the first fund in 1890, the movement grew exponentially over the next two decades, reaching 1,400 cooperatives with more than 320,000 members in 1913.⁵⁹ The peasants were well aware of the importance of this enterprise for the development of their community. The activities of *Stefczyk’s Funds* alleviated the economic crises that afflicted the countryside. “After the fund was set up in the village, it was easier for even the poorest to buy a cow ... Some people had been trying to buy a cow for years.”⁶⁰

Although the memoirs of cooperative members contain no overtly antisemitic references, the official cooperative rhetoric, both in Galicia and other Polish territories,

⁵² *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 1:310.

⁵³ Chałasiński, *Młode pokolenie chłopów*, 3:228; 4:482.

⁵⁴ Irena Kostrowicka, Zbigniew Landau, and Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Historia gospodarcza Polski XIX i XX wieku* (Warsaw, 1984), 88.

⁵⁵ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 1:308.

⁵⁶ More about *Stefczyk’s Funds*: Bohdan Cywiński, *Idzie o dobro wspólne...: Opowieść o Franciszku Stefczyku* (Sopot, 2011).

⁵⁷ Holger Bonus, *Die Genossenschaft als modernes Unternehmenskonzept* (Münster, 1987), 7–8.

⁵⁸ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 1:312.

⁵⁹ *Zarys historii polskiego ruchu spółdzielczego*, 200.

⁶⁰ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 1:330.

intricately intertwined efforts to counteract usurious credit with a campaign against “alien Jewish capital.”⁶¹ As cooperatives evolved into a grassroots form of socio-economic mobilization and a tool of nationalist policy, a consensus emerged among the majority of political forces expressing aversion towards Jews, positioning them as a perceived fifth column within Polish society.⁶² This entanglement extended to the peasant movement and associated cooperative activities, which highlighted Jewish innkeepers, entrepreneurs, and bankers as major forces draining the economic resources of peasant farms. While Józef Kapuściński’s recollections of his youth in the Galician countryside does not mention the word “Jew,” we can guess who the greedy innkeepers are: “Credit chalked twice enriched the manor and the innkeeper, and left the peasant alone... . The innkeeper bought tenement houses in the city, educated children to become lawyers and doctors, or bought a farm.”⁶³

Sławomir Tokarski elucidates the structural nature of the ethnic conflict between the peasantry and Jews in Galicia, attributing the emergence of the “Jewish bloodsucker” stereotype to the agricultural crisis and demographic pressures in the countryside during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶⁴ The social and economic relations of the peasants with the Jews are almost symbiotic—for the poor people, the Jews were providers of basic goods, often cheaper and trading without the class prejudices of the Christian bourgeoisie.⁶⁵ The Jews also played a role as providers of capital to vulnerable peasant farms, given the absence of alternative forms of investment.⁶⁶ This conflict had a modernizing effect on the countryside—the emergence of agricultural and credit cooperatives regulated the high-interest loan market, but antisemitic arguments—often removed from realities—survived among people’s and cooperative activists for a long time, changing their character only in the late 1930s. From this period comes, among others, the account of Paweł Mucha, a co-operative member from former Galicia, who, despite strong complaints from his comrades from the co-operative union, begins to cooperate with a Jewish entrepreneur offering the best conditions and a fair contract:

I declared that I would immediately terminate the contract if the Polish patriot they indicated concluded an agreement on the same terms. “The Central Fund cannot waste peasant achievements to finance patriotic slogans. Besides, the tenant—a Jew—is, according to the information collected, a loyal Polish citizen and a reliable trader,” I said... . I won the case, but the opinion of me as a nationally unreliable person who is capable of extorting the nation’s interests for silver coins has strengthened.⁶⁷

Mucha’s open position, while possibly influenced by the political correctness prevailing in the early Polish People’s Republic, aligns with the broader cooperative discourse of the time. Many peasants, particularly those associated with *Wici* or the People’s Party (*Stronnictwo Ludowe*), began to perceive the primary threat to the peasant movement not from Jews, Ukrainians, or other “aliens,” but from the ultranationalism rooted in

⁶¹ Cornelius Gröschel, “Causes and Applications of Antisemitism in Interwar Polish Cooperatives” in Lorenz, ed., *Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflicts*, 283–306.

⁶² See also: William H. Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1914–1920* (Cambridge, Eng., 2010); Theodore R. Weeks, *From Assimilation to Antisemitism: The “Jewish Question” in Poland, 1850–1914* (DeKalb, IL, 2006).

⁶³ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 2:82.

⁶⁴ Sławomir Mańko, *Polski ruch ludowy wobec Żydów 1895–1939* (Warsaw, 2010), 94–95.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁶ Sławomir Tokarski, *Ethnic Conflict and Economic Development: Jews in Galician Agriculture 1868–1914* (Warsaw, 2003), 241.

⁶⁷ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 2:160.

the bourgeois-noble elites of the authoritarian *Sanacja* state, and the clerical-nationalist discourse of the National Democratic Party (*Endecja*).⁶⁸

Although the reference to the ethos of the cooperatives set up by Stefczyk—a national solidarist—did not align perfectly with the official message of the Communist Party ruling Poland after 1945, the narrators who wrote under the conditions of a socialist state were nevertheless eager to highlight the crucial role of these cooperatives in achieving economic emancipation for the peasantry in the interwar era. Although the memoirists incorporated their narratives into the official language of state socialism in order to give it meaning and universality, the discourse on the struggle against poverty was much broader for them than was officially legitimized in the Polish People's Republic.⁶⁹ Therefore, we do not find overt antisemitic remarks in peasant memoirs written after the war. The reason, however, does not have to do solely with the issue of political correctness, but also with the social sensitivity of peasant activists, which was forged in the conflict with right-wing movements of the interwar period.⁷⁰

“We are poor, but we still read the papers”⁷¹

An awareness emerged among peasants of their own economic deprivation, alongside the spread of post-Enlightenment aspirations for prosperity and equality. Although this awareness arose later than among the working class, precursors to it had already been present in various forms of “moral economics” since feudal times.⁷² Yet it was not until the early years of the twentieth century that this dissatisfaction could be transformed into effective institutions for collective action. The turn of the twentieth century brought several events that strongly influenced the construction of a peasant political identity: crop failures haunting the lands of the Kingdom of Poland and Galicia at the end of the nineteenth century; the workers' revolution of 1905 in the Kingdom; the wars (Crimean 1853–56, Russo-Japanese 1904–05) to which peasant sons were sent; and the mass economic emigration to the United States and South America.⁷³ As a young, curious boy, Władysław Kisała listened with delight to the stories of older colleagues who had had such experiences:

From these stories I learned that people elsewhere lead better lives, that it is therefore true that you can live better, dress better and live in greater abundance. I was reassured by these stories that poverty is not a necessity, as people thought in our country. All that is needed is for people to organize themselves and make a collective effort to improve their lives.⁷⁴

The post-Enlightenment belief in the possibility of “taking matters into one's own hands” and the real possibilities for changing one's social position in a globalizing world led

⁶⁸ Edward W. Wynot, “The Polish Peasant Movement and the Jews, 1918–39,” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 82–84.

⁶⁹ Marzec, “Working Out Socialism,” 371; see also analogous claims about Officers of the Polish Security Forces after the Second World War; Łukasz Bertram, “Remembering on Command: Autobiographical Narratives of the Officers of the Polish Security Forces, 1944–1956,” *East European Politics and Societies* 37, no. 4 (November 2023): 1204–26.

⁷⁰ Wynot, “The Polish Peasant Movement and the Jews, 1918–39,” 80.

⁷¹ “My bidne, a gazety to cytywomy” (from: *Pamiętniki chłopów*, 58).

⁷² Critical interpretation of Edward Thompson's classical notion of moral economy (Edward P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50 [February 1971]: 76–136); find more in: Rauszer, *Siła podporządkowanych*, 87–90.

⁷³ Fijałkowski, *Pamiętnik*, 27.

⁷⁴ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 1:314.

peasants to seek tools to improve their own lives. Their main motivation was to improve their economic situation, but this demand necessarily directed rural reformers towards political goals, including the extension of the peasantry's civil rights. This motivation was fueled by the activities of social and educational movements such as *Zaranie*, whose main ideologists, among them Maksymilian Malinowski, and folk education theorists, such as Jadwiga Dziubińska or Irena Kosmowska, placed great emphasis on combining agricultural modernization with the development of secular political awareness.⁷⁵

Although most of the memoirs examined were written in the postwar period, it is nevertheless difficult to believe that the individuals involved in building the peasant and cooperative movement were not sufficiently aware at an earlier stage in their lives. Most of the writers of these narratives came from very poor peasant families. In almost all cases, we can see a clear pattern of moving from initial doubts about cooperative activity to a moment of surprise and fascination, and finally, to conscious and full participation in the movement. The development of the institutional structure is in this case closely intertwined with the biographical trajectory, with key dates in the functioning and development of the former representing turning points in the latter.

As I have already mentioned, many of these actors expressed a poor recollection of their first contact with a cooperative, usually a people's bank or grocery shop. The first obstacle for them to overcome was often the common belief among the rural population that work in trade and sales was dishonest and unworthy of a person who worked the land. Regina Koć, a peasant woman from a poor village near Warsaw, who had started working for a consumer cooperative, observed a small Jewish shop where the shopkeeper had to "toil hard" to please customers.⁷⁶ This led her to think that "in trade one has to lose one's dignity, and endure humiliation all the time." Koć decided that she would never work in such a profession.⁷⁷ Fate can be fickle, however: she was later recruited to work at the *Spółem* cooperative shop in Mrozy near Warsaw, where she embarked on a path that led her from a position as cashier to member of a people's organization, and later a cooperative promoter.⁷⁸ "I was particularly proud that this was not merely a job, but a service to a great and important idea—cooperativism."⁷⁹ In her case, the cooperative became a transducer in which the awareness of the peasant woman's own social position grew in

⁷⁵ Michalski, *Dzieje szkolnictwa i oświaty na wsi polskiej*, 237.

⁷⁶ Here we can clearly see the influence that antisemitic nationalist propaganda based on older myths and stereotypes had on the peasantry—both Polish and Ukrainian (John-Paul Himka, "Ukrainian-Jewish Antagonism in the Galician Countryside During the Late Nineteenth Century," in Peter J. Potichnyj and Howard Aster, eds., *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective* [Edmonton, 1988], 111–58). While there is an absence of explicit antisemitism in Koć's words, they nonetheless convey a negative valorization of the shopkeeper's profession. This negative portrayal, in a nuanced double loop, implies an underlying aversion towards Jews engaged in what is deemed a "disgraceful" profession (Alina Cała, *Wizerunek Żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej* [Warsaw, 2005]; Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1914–1920*, 35). Koć's account subtly integrates antisemitic threads, aligning with the paradoxical nature of the ostensibly tolerant and open cooperative discourse of that era. This discourse often employed antisemitic rhetoric for the economic mobilization of the peasantry, serving as a competitive strategy against the markedly nationalist *Endecja* (Wynot, "The Polish Peasant Movement and the Jews, 1918–39," 82–84). It is noteworthy that the cooperative movement frequently instrumentalized antisemitism as a defense against the "internal enemy" (Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1914–1920*, 184) while simultaneously engaging in commercial cooperation with Jewish entrepreneurs. In some instances, the cooperative movement and Jewish entrepreneurs even collaborated within the same cooperative union (Gröschel, "Causes and Applications of Anti-semitism in Interwar Polish Cooperatives," 303).

⁷⁷ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 5:129.

⁷⁸ *Spółem*, i.e., the Union of Polish Consumer Associations, the largest association of consumer cooperatives in interwar Poland, was founded in 1911 by a group of pioneers centered around Stanisław Wojciechowski, as well as by those associated with Edward Abramowski and the Cooperativists' Society (active since 1906).

⁷⁹ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 5:133.

juxtaposition to the social position of the customers, who generally came from the upper classes. “I was amused by their petty bourgeois views and sometimes irritated by their anti-peasant statements.” Coming into the shop, the wives of officers and clerks “imagined the countryside as a kind of overseas colony, where the ignorant and dirty natives must work for the enlightened stratum, to which they counted themselves.”⁸⁰ Already equipped with knowledge from books by radical leftist cooperative promoters like Abramowski, Thugutt, and Tuhan-Baranowski, she sought to resist to these stigmatizing judgments by proving that the peasantry was as much a causal instance within the modern nation as the workers or the bourgeoisie.⁸¹ In the space of the cooperative, the “top-down modernity” of the narratives of the dominant classes clashed with the bottom-up and asynchronous position of the subjects, who experienced modernity, as it were, in resistance to the social conditions of the era.

In many narratives we find evidence that the cooperative played the role of the first disseminator of radical social ideas, both those of agrarianism and socialism. This poignant excerpt from a peasant memoir submitted in 1935 for a competition of the Institute of Social Economy attests to the formative role of cooperatives:

I use the library of the Rural Youth Circle for a fee of 25 grosz a month. When it comes to papers, I only read: *Spółnota* (The Community), *Wici* (The Call), and *Wyzwolenie* (Liberation). *Spółnota* I get from the Cooperative because cooperatives subscribe for their members. *Wici* is subscribed to by the Rural Youth Circle, and *Wyzwolenie* I subscribe to with four young lads from my village, which costs us less, and we stick to the principle that a man don't just live on bread alone [*człowiek nie tylko żyje samym chlebem*]. That is why older folks sometimes laugh at us, that we are poor but still read the papers [*my bidne, a gazety to cytowomy*].⁸²

Many small rural cooperatives maintained modest libraries in which publications from agrarian circles, as well as works by cooperative and socialist ideologues could be found. Władysław Kisała recalled that regular debates took place at meetings of the agrarian circles. “In addition to the *Przewodnik Kółek Rolniczych* (Guidebook of Agrarian Circles), *Wieniec-Pszczółka* (Wreath-Bee), published by Fr. Stojałowski, was read at the meetings. The agrarian circle spread the idea of an independent peasant struggle for political and economic rights.”⁸³ Although the last sentence clearly reflects the times in which the memoirs were written (the period of the socialist state), Kisała does not write it solely to ground his discourse in the “truth of the times.” With the benefit of hindsight, he understands perfectly the cultural and political role of farmers’ associations, and confirms that involvement in cooperatives required a strong ideological base. The conceptual vocabulary of peasant activists is immersed more in a specific organizational, social, or even economic and accounting discourse, rather than in the ideologically driven discourses of political factions, whether socialist or agrarian. The struggle for social rights is more often associated with the ideals of diligent work, prudent investments, or efficient management than with the courage of armed or political struggle. However, in the memory of peasant activists, these two aspects are interconnected and form a cohesive whole: “I must truthfully say that working in it [the credit cooperative and the agrarian circle—B.B.] always gave me a

⁸⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁸¹ Edward Abramowski (1868–1918), Polish socialist, pioneer of the social sciences, and main ideologist of Polish cooperativism; Stanisław Thugutt (1873–1941), politician of the Polish People's Party *Wyzwolenie*, cooperative activist; Mikhail Tuhan-Baranowski (1865–1919), Ukrainian economist, politician and cooperative ideologist.

⁸² *Pamiętniki chłopów*, 58.

⁸³ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 1:311.

lot of pleasure and really grabbed me ... I always had the feeling that I was in some way contributing to the improvement of the life of the rural community from which I came.”⁸⁴ Importantly, however, these down-to-earth ideals are often linked to a broader scope of civic, national and political emancipation.

Władysław Cholewa recalled that after starting his work in the cooperative movement, he joined the renowned *Lubelska Spółdzielnia Spożywców* (Lublin Consumer Cooperative, LSS) in 1916, which was conceptually inspired by the well-known socialist radical, Jan Hempel.

He became my ideological tutor. I was under his spell. But he, this bright and versatile mind, believed that in the struggle for a better tomorrow, for changing the system, one should rely solely on the working class. The peasantry was out of the question... I had to part ways with the LSS. I said to Jan Hempel: I will go to teach the peasant not to be ignorant and to know how to work, to stop being miserable, to become worthy to stand beside the worker in the struggle for a better system ... I returned to the rural cooperative.⁸⁵

Without the help of critical theory, Kisała deconstructed the worldview of the workers' activist who used the classical Marxist model of social evolution. The peasantry, in Hempel's eyes, did not fit into the image of political modernity, while the proletariat became an essential unity connected by the mind of the “ideologue.” Thus, the Marxist conception of change seemed to Cholewa as much metaphysical as paternalistic. Another cooperative activist, Paweł Mucha, after visiting a priest—the leader of a nationalist-Catholic party in the council of the agricultural cooperative union—regretted that his interlocutor did not believe in the strength of the popular class.

Father Janczewski firmly believed that his path of care and patronage of the politically immature peasant masses by the enlightened spheres (clergy, intelligentsia, landed gentry) was the only right one. It is a great pity that he and his ilk ... failed to trust the political maturity and the organizational abilities of the popular masses.⁸⁶

From the peasants' point of view, both narratives present an elitist picture of the people, appearing here as passive matter requiring aggregation by external forces. Both Kisała and Mucha testified with their own lives to a quite different position for the peasantry in the historical process.

“Peasants should be organized”

In number 32 of the collection *Memoirs of Peasants*, we can find one of the most interesting autobiographical accounts of peasant life in the first half of the twentieth century in Poland: a smallholder peasant from Wołkowyski region who devotes a large part of his account to the miserable social conditions in which he lived. He declares at the end of his story: “the peasants should be organized like the other strata of industrialists and traders, and should have no differences between them, nor should nationality or Religion stand in the way of uniting the rural people.”⁸⁷ This asynchronous biography contains two, seemingly incompatible, temporal layers. A layer of pre-modern misery, which seems to locate the author's life in the time of feudal bondage, and a thoroughly modern layer, in which the discourse of

⁸⁴ Fijałkowski, *Pamiętnik*, 252.

⁸⁵ Cholewa, *Wspomnienia*, 2.

⁸⁶ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 2:175.

⁸⁷ *Pamiętniki chłopów*, 451.

emancipation is located. Peasant biographies refute simple divisions between the modern and the pre-modern: the message of simple peasants from the Polish-Soviet borderlands confirms their place in the transforming public sphere of the young state, while the political and social activity of peasant activists reflects more than merely an aspiration to modernity. Rather, it expresses a creative adaptation to the changing conditions of the global economy, which were transforming both the local economic structure and the possibility to articulate political claims.⁸⁸

In the present section, I would like to look at the “subversive” threads of the autobiographies of peasant cooperative activists dating mainly from the period 1918–39 in order to show how, under the conditions of the new Polish state, they confronted the dominant political narratives (governmental, ecclesiastical, and even the message of the mass people’s parties). In these writings, peasant activists describe the frequent struggles they waged to maintain the class character of agricultural or consumer cooperatives. Many agricultural cooperatives in this period were affiliated with head offices that oversaw both small peasant organizations and large landowners’ syndicates. The meetings and general assemblies of cooperatives were an arena of fierce struggles between representatives of the peasant movement and landowners. Władysław Cholewa described in his memoirs the interesting case of the agrarian and trading cooperative in Grajewo in northern Poland. This very profitable organization became the target of a hostile takeover by a local landowners’ agricultural syndicate. “When asked for my opinion, I supported the opponents of the merger. The rejection of the syndicate’s proposal for amalgamation ... a unanimous one ... showed that the peasants were against mixing with the landowners ... The peasant did not go along with the court.”⁸⁹ During the 1930s, the increasingly engaged peasants collectively rejected the possibility of cooperation with the landed gentry on unequal terms.

The 1930s also saw an increasingly open conflict between peasant movements and the *Sanacja* regime.⁹⁰ The continuing economic disadvantage of the peasantry during the Great Depression and legislation favoring large landownership sparked a wave of public speeches and strikes, which also became a forge for peasant self-organization.⁹¹ Peasant strikes, which often ended in bloody pacifications, were accompanied by attempts to seize power over agricultural cooperatives, both locally and nationally.⁹²

In 1933 a wave of arrests began across the villages. Life was becoming harder and harder for the peasants. Not surprisingly, a movement arose in the countryside against government policy. People agitated and spoke out more and more boldly at rallies about their ills and demanded an improvement in relations in the countryside.⁹³

⁸⁸ About current research on rural movements from the global struggle against capitalist development as a “universally applicable and beneficial model”: Philip McMichael, “Changing the Subject of Development,” in Philip McMichael, ed., *Contesting Development: Critical Struggles for Social Change* (New York, 2009), 5–7.

⁸⁹ Cholewa, *Wspomnienia*, 65.

⁹⁰ *Sanacja* (Latin: *sanatio*, “recovery”), colloquial name for the authoritarian regime in the Second Polish Republic, 1926–39, functioning after the so-called May Coup of 1926, under the leadership of Marshal Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935).

⁹¹ Sławomir Kalinowski and Weronika Wyduba, “Rural Poverty in Poland Between the Wars,” *Rural History* 32, no. 2 (October 2021): 217–32.

⁹² These efforts culminated in the subordination of the former unions of agricultural cooperatives to the state and their incorporation into a newly formed organization called the Union of Agricultural and Earning-Economic Cooperatives (Związek Spółdzielni Rolniczych i Zarobkowo-Gospodarczych) in 1935; Tadeusz Romanowski, *Z dziejów spółdzielczości rolniczej w latach wielkiego kryzysu 1929–1934* (Warsaw, 1964), 122–28.

⁹³ *Wspomnienia działaczy spółdzielczych*, 1:335.

This period left a strong mark in the memory of cooperative activists, who recalled it as a difficult time of struggle to preserve autonomy, and as the time of the formation of a modern agrarian movement in opposition to both the authoritarian state and the influence of traditional political parties in the countryside.

In the 1930s, agrarianism became almost the official ideology of the peasant movements in Poland, aligning with a general trend in central and eastern Europe. It created a kind of ideological framework accommodating the various influences of other political projects. It was thus part of the landscape of modern ideologies, but also a form of resistance to the aggressive modernization of the countryside by the state (both capitalist and Soviet) and the subsequent “proletarianization” of peasant movements.⁹⁴ In various national contexts, agrarianism adopted both a strongly anti-modernist trait and, conversely, became a kind of “third way” for modernization, an alternative to both Soviet collectivism and the western European market economy.⁹⁵ The organization that most fully represented agrarian ideals in Poland was the Union of Rural Youth *Wici*.⁹⁶ As Andrzej Lach put it, the main “ideologues of this movement believed that self-organization should be the basic tool for modernizing the countryside.”⁹⁷ As in other countries in the region, the vision of a peasant “cooperative republic” constituted something of a “core concept”⁹⁸ for many heterogeneous rural modernization projects.⁹⁹

Thus, at the intersection of peasant revolts and new agrarian ideas, a class of new peasant activists was being formed at this time. Their biographies transcend the usual ways of thinking about conservatism, clericalism, or the economic backwardness of the people. An example of a biography that gives us an intimate look into the activities of the peasant socio-political movements during this time is that of Władysław Kojder (1902–45). He was born in the village of Grzęski in the Podkarpacie region, belonging then to the Habsburg monarchy, where he lived his entire life. The peak of Kojder’s activity occurred during the economically difficult years after the Great Depression, during which there was also a growing conflict between the radicalizing peasant movement and the authoritarian rulers of the Second Republic.¹⁰⁰ Kojder was well aware that the emancipation of the countryside could not take place without its economic and educational modernization. His political activities included organizing both peasant protests, such as the “march on Przeworsk” in 1933 or the rural strike in Krzeczowice in 1937, and local cooperatives and trade unions. Among other things, he was the creator of a dairy in Grzęska (he even donated the land for its construction), which later became a part of the *Spółem* Union.¹⁰¹ As a young peasant, he was first involved in the creation of the Małopolski Związek Młodzieży (Lesser Poland Youth Association), which was supportive of the *Sanacja* regime. Upon observing the paternalistic and hierarchical manner in which the organization’s management operated, however, he resigned from membership in 1928 in favor of the nascent *Wici* Union, of which he

⁹⁴ Balázs Trencsényi, “Transcending Modernity: Agrarian Populist Visions of Collective Regeneration in Interwar East Central Europe,” in Diana Mishkova, Balázs Trencsényi and Marja Jalava, eds., *Regimes of Historicity in Southeastern and Northern Europe, 1890–1945: Discourses of Identity and Temporality* (London, 2014), 119–45.

⁹⁵ Stanisław Miłkowski, *Agraryzm jako forma przebudowy ustroju społecznego* (Kraków, 1934); see also: Piotr Wawrzyniuk, ed., *Societal Change and Ideological Formation among the Rural Population of the Baltic Area 1880–1939* (Huddinge, Sweden, 2008).

⁹⁶ Trocka, *Spółdzielczość w programach i polityce polskich stronnictw ludowych*, 167–75.

⁹⁷ Andrzej Lach, *Agraryzm wiciowy* (Łódź, 1991), 46.

⁹⁸ Michael Freeden, “The Morphological Analysis of Ideology,” in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Marc Stears, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford, 2013), 115–37.

⁹⁹ Lyuben Berov, “The Idea of a ‘Cooperative Society’ in East European Peasant Movements During the Interwar Period,” in Ferenc Glatz, ed., *Modern Age—Modern Historian: In Memoriam György Ránki (1930–1988)* (Budapest, 1990), 265–86.

¹⁰⁰ Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski*, 463–66.

¹⁰¹ Barbara Matus, ed., *Człowiek niezłomny Władysław Kojder: 1902–1945* (Warsaw, 2015), 48.

became an important and popular activist.¹⁰² Throughout his relatively short life, he also contributed to the development of the people's movement, to the extent that Wincenty Witos—the most prominent leader in the peasant movement—saw him as his successor.¹⁰³ After the war, communist militants kidnapped and murdered him in unclear circumstances.

The figure of Kojder is an example of the formation of a “folk intellectual,” whose cultural capital was developed not in salons or an academic environment (his education was limited to a rural school), but through his organizational work at the Association, the establishment of local cooperatives, and participation in courses at the People's University in Szyce. He became a prominent representative and organizer of the university after its first seat was closed by the authorities.¹⁰⁴ Education here followed entirely different paths than in the case of the elite. It did not take place in university lecture halls, but rather through practical activities. Its aims went beyond preserving the social hierarchy with academic titles, and instead served the cause of political emancipation, enabling peasants to voice their opinions using a language created through their own efforts that allowed for a real transformation of their living conditions and ways of life.

After the University was closed by the *Sanacja* authorities, Kojder wrote to its founder Ignacy Solarz: “We know that Szyce was passionate about what all of us rural people, commoners ... are passionate about... . Nothing socialized people so strongly as Szyce.”¹⁰⁵ Thanks to Kojder and some others, the University was saved and moved to the village of Gać, where it continued to function as an educational and training center for *Wici* personnel.¹⁰⁶ For Kojder, *Wici* represented an organization through which the peasantry could achieve self-emancipation, without the help of external forces. As he wrote in a 1930 article: “The peasant in collective life today is not just an object, susceptible to exploitation by one kind of people or another ... but an important force that must influence the shaping of all sections of the life of the new Poland more profoundly.”¹⁰⁷ In this passage, Kojder refers to the ethos of self-organization and self-governance that formed the core of *Wici* ideology.¹⁰⁸

Analysis of the autobiographical narratives of peasant activists shows us not only how traditional forms of contested identity were realized in new historical circumstances, but also how this coupling created new repertoires and political identities, inventing “new traditions” that filled the seemingly homogeneous and universal space of modernity.¹⁰⁹ In Kojder's work, the awakening of cultural consciousness among the peasantry took the form of a specific transgression of traditional rural conservatism through a sharp critique of the anti-peasant activities of the Catholic Church, seen as an institution of power, and the resurrection of pre-Christian ideals. The aim was to break with the hegemony of elitist cultural visions, alien to the peasantry, and with “noble-bourgeois narrow-mindedness.”¹¹⁰ At the 1931 Spring Festival organized by Kojder in Przeworsk, pagan visions were combined with the most up-to-date reformist and pedagogical content possible, while at the same time seeking to avoid getting caught up in the chauvinist-nationalist rhetoric typical of many discourses referring to ethno-cultural heritage at the time. In an article providing instruction on how to organize the event, he wrote:

¹⁰² Ibid., 38.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰⁵ Władysław Kojder, “Artykuły, listy, dzienniki,” in Barbara Matus, ed., *Człowiek niezłomny. Władysław Kojder* (Warsaw, 2015), 193–94. More relations about the People's University in Gać and Szyce: Chałasiński, *Młode pokolenie chłopów*, vol. 4, 453, 531.

¹⁰⁶ Matus, *Człowiek niezłomny*, 42.

¹⁰⁷ Kojder, “Artykuły, listy, dzienniki,” 157.

¹⁰⁸ Lech, *Agraryzm wiciowy*, 113.

¹⁰⁹ Massimiliano Tomba, *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity* (New York, 2019), 30.

¹¹⁰ Matus, *Człowiek niezłomny*, 39.

Local rural customs will have here a pleasant opportunity to reveal their artistic value and beauty. Cut the talk and reciting—as little of it, as possible... . There should be a lot of singing. Sing folk songs, not the urban “black eyes” [an urban song motif—B.B.], or it would turn the spring festival into a comedy.¹¹¹

The Spring Festival was supposed to be a celebration of an independent peasantry building the “People’s Poland.”¹¹² It was therefore supposed to turn not to an imagined national or class identity, but to the original peasant identity and draw inspiration from it.

Kojder had no accumulated capital. Throughout his life, he supported himself mainly by the work of his own hands, and yet he became one of the most active peasants of his time. However, there were certainly more activists, politicians, organizers, and peasant intellectuals like him. Although they constituted a relatively small group, what is most important is that their biographies remain in direct relation to the social conditions in which they lived. These biographies are a crucial part of modernizing processes in all their shades and layers as they affected the popular classes at the turn of the twentieth century on the periphery of a globalizing capitalism.

The scale of peasant involvement in cooperatives in what is present-day Poland and central and eastern Europe was so significant that its omission in contemporary Polish works on people’s history cannot be a matter of coincidence. I have critiqued the essentialist image of modernity through an autobiographically-grounded study of peasant engagement with institutions of collective action. Its aim is to show the historical presence of the people not through an “institutional-centric” image of modernity, but through the direct experience of the peasants themselves, who realized existential needs, both economic and political, through their own “subversive institutions.”¹¹³ In this way, I have been able to conceptualize peasantry as having agency that produces autonomous forms of action, an alternative agrarian ideology, and its own model of an intellectual-activist born in opposition to both overarching narratives of power and local intellectual discourses of emancipation.¹¹⁴

The history of peasant involvement in creating modern institutions is thus depicted in three interlocking planes that allow us to reconstruct the biographical trajectory of popular emancipation. First, as the analysis of autobiographical accounts written both in the 1930s and after the war in the communist state have shown, peasants were well aware that this form of activity was one of the few available platforms for breaking the spiral of exploitation. Second, peasant writers show cooperatives in their memoirs as catalysts for self-education and the dissemination of knowledge, depicting them as spaces that were alternatives to schools, cafés, or salons, where in the daily practice of farm work, community organization, and speaking out—an autonomous peasant consciousness was born. Third and finally, cooperatives in central and eastern Europe represented a creative phenomenon of the political economy, born within the framework of capitalist modernity, both as a form of resistance to it and as an integral element of the trend toward popular self-help, allowing a multitude of people to escape poverty and exploitation and creating investment opportunities under the conditions of “partially successful” state modernization efforts.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Kojder, “Artykuły, listy, dzienniki,” 161.

¹¹² The concept of “People’s Poland” became one of the basic concepts of Polish agrarianism in the 1930s and was officially adopted by the newly formed communist state, the Polish People’s Republic, in 1952.

¹¹³ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1877–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (London, 2007), 116.

¹¹⁴ Jerry White, “Beyond Autobiography,” in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (New York, 1981), 37.

¹¹⁵ Ivan T. Berend, *History Derailed: Central and Eastern Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 2003), xv.

If we treat economic activity as a causal tool in the hands of those who have hitherto been denied subjectivity, we can avoid repeating the two fundamental errors that people's historians have committed. First, we will no longer have to deny peasants their modernity by categorizing their activities as anachronistic contestation repertoires that arose from anti-feudal struggles. Second, we acknowledge their ability co-create an alternative, plebeian public sphere in which the classical post-Enlightenment category of politics gives way to an approach that is asynchronous (seen from the perspective of local practices rather than global narratives) and subversive (created by the "masses" without any political mandate).¹¹⁶ As Walter Benjamin put it: people operated "in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands."¹¹⁷ Peasant institutions of collective action mark a space in which divisions between the economic, social, and political were themselves becoming anachronistic. Rural cooperatives, which constituted modern forms of action for subjects nominally considered pre-modern, created an autonomous domain where collective action around the mundane matters of everyday existence created "political" outcomes without copying or depending on elite forms of political organization.¹¹⁸ The omission of this fact in the classical narrative reduced peasant resistance to a transcendent and extra-temporal category, convenient only for academic intellectuals.¹¹⁹

In writing a history of popular institutions of collective action, therefore, it is not enough to write merely about social or economic history. What is needed is a history that follows the fates of causality. In his book *Miejski grunt* (Urban Land), discussed extensively in Poland, Rafał Matyja stated that the criterion for writing such a history would be "the introduction of a change—not necessarily visible to the naked eye. A change in space, in modes of behavior, in the capacities of individuals."¹²⁰ The history of cooperative institutions is like a mirror reflecting the specifics of economic and political transformations of central and eastern Europe in the twentieth century. The life stories of the peasant founders of these institutions demonstrate how important the emancipation of the rural people was to the development of the region. This is political history *par excellence*.

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¹¹⁶ Boris B. Gorshkov, *Peasants in Russia from Serfdom to Stalin: Accommodation, Survival, Resistance* (London, 2018), chapter 8.

¹¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 2007), 261.

¹¹⁸ Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 5.

¹¹⁹ Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988), 271–313. While I am here criticizing this form of historical essentialization of peasant political subjectivity drawn from Subaltern studies, it is worth noting in the end that even in their writings, the "disappearance" of the figure of the subaltern received a critical study: Sumit Sarkar, "The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies," in Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial* (London, 2000), 300–23.

¹²⁰ Rafał Matyja, *Miejski grunt. 250 lat polskiej gry z nowoczesnością* (Kraków, 2021), 11.