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# Contemporary book culture in Poland and its background

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary Polish book culture is the sum of the historical experience of the Polish state and nation, whose fate was varied and often dramatic over the last thousand years. The dynamics of development in times of war and enslavement were marked by slowdowns. The Poles suffered immense population and material losses. Readership, for a long time, was reserved for the upper layers of the society. The peasants were not generally included in the area of literacy until the mid-twentieth century, the consequences of which are visible to this day. The contemporary Polish book culture is firmly rooted in tradition, however, it is subject to far-reaching transformations and modifications related to the technological and social changes taking place in Poland and worldwide, that overlapped in the transition period. After 1989, the rebuilt free publishing and bookselling market, after the turbulent period of structural transformation, is now relatively orderly and functions efficiently.

**KEYWORDS:** Book culture, book market, readership, culture, political transformation

## STRESZCZENIE

*Współczesna kultura książki w Polsce i jej korzenie – rynek i czytelnicy*

Współczesna polska kultura książki jest sumą doświadczeń historycznych państwa i narodu, które w przeciągu minionego tysiąclecia przechodziły rozmaite, często dramatyczne koleje losu. Dynamika rozwoju w kolejnych okresach była zróżnicowana, w czasach wojen i niewoli następowało spowolnienie, ponosiliśmy dotkliwe straty ludzkie i materialne. Czytelnictwo przez długi czas ograniczone było do warstw wyższych, wszyscy chłopci znaleźli się w obszarze piśmienności dopiero w połowie XX wieku, czego konsekwencje są widoczne po dziś dzień. Współczesna kultura książki polskiej mocno osadzona w tradycji, ulega jednak ciągle daleko idącym przekształceniom i modyfikacjom, związanym z zachodzącymi w Polsce i na świecie zmianami społecznymi i technologicznymi, które nałożyły się na siebie w okresie transformacji ustrojowej. Odtworzony po 1989 roku wolny rynek wydawniczy i księgarski przeszedł okres dynamicznych przekształceń strukturalnych, obecnie jest już względnie uporządkowany i sprawnie funkcjonuje.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: kultura książki, rynek książki, czytelnictwo, kultura, transformacja ustrojowa

In this article, I aim to present the basic issues of the modern book market and readership in Poland. I decided to make references to a key concept of book science: “book culture”, by which we mean all the phenomena, processes, human and material resources associated with books.<sup>1</sup> Books are written, published, bound, sold, bought, stored and collected, read, destroyed, etc. All this is done in a specific time and place, it has a context and a mathematical dimension. It creates a specific book culture, appropriate to a particular country and society. Without a broad and multifaceted perspective like this, it is difficult to explain and understand the structure and condition of the book market, readership, librarianship, and finally, bibliophilia, which is, after all, a very important part of the book culture, even though it is marginal in terms of numbers.

1 K. Migoń, *Bibliologia – nauka o kulturze książki*, in *Encyklopedia książki*, eds. A. Żbikowska-Migoń, M. Skalska-Zlat, vol. 1: *Eseje. A-J*, Wrocław 2017, pp. 23-32.

## Roots and sources of the book culture in Poland<sup>2</sup>

Book culture in Poland, as in other countries in this part of Europe, was formed a little later than in the West, on the basis of western, Latin models. The foundations of this culture were laid by the Church (mainly in monasteries), and later at the royal court and among civil servants. The book culture was later entered also by representatives of the political elite, the aristocracy, nobility and rich bourgeoisie. Universities (in addition to other scientific and educational institutions, including colleges and secondary schools) that emerged in Poland – Cracow (1364), Vilna (1589), and Lvov (1661) – became crucial elements of the book world. They became centers for intellectual elites, libraries, publishing houses, bookstores, and bookbinding shops. Following the trends set by royal and bishopric libraries, magnates would gather quite substantial collections of books. Sometimes, the gentry and the bourgeoisie would establish their own libraries, too. Literature flourished. More and more books were written in Polish and Latin, both religious and secular. From the end of the fifteenth century, printing developed, resulting in the growth of book resources and the subsequent expansion of the circle of readers. Unfortunately, the wars of the seventeenth century, and especially the Swedish invasion in the years 1655-1660, hindered this development, and above all, wrecked serious damages to the collections, which were looted or destroyed. To this day, Polish researchers make use of the Swedish collections gained in this way, as they often are the only known and saved copies of the works. Book culture, literature, and science were also affected by the Counter-Reformation at the turn of the seventeenth century. Censorship pushed some literary areas into private manuscript circulation, which bloomed until the mid-eighteenth century, becoming a kind of a specifically Polish phenomenon at that time, referred to as the “old Polish culture of the manuscript”. Works of the greatest writers – Wespazjan Kochowski’s, the Morsztyns’, Waclaw Potocki’s, and the most important old Polish poetry anthology, *Wirydarz poetycki*, which was not released in print until the beginning of the twentieth century, circulated in hand-copied editions, as did numerous collections of anecdotes etc. However, the most spectacular manifestation of the old Polish manuscript culture is the *silva rerum*. The *silva rerum* was a collection of various texts – notes, recipes, pharmaceutical formulas, records of family history, memories, etc. – which was created generation after generation in almost every household among the gentry, and its tradition survived even until the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

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2 B. Kosmanowa, *Książka i jej czytelnicy w dawnej Polsce*, Warszawa 1981.

3 J. Partyka, *Rękopisy dworu szlacheckiego doby staropolskiej*, Warszawa 1995.



1. Princess Mathilda gives the book to the Polish King Mieszko II (*Codex of Mathilda/Ordo Romanus*, 11th cent.).



2. Plundering of the Jagiellonian Library by the Swedes in 1655, by Michał Stachowicz, 1821(?); National Library, Warsaw.

## Limited range of literacy and its causes

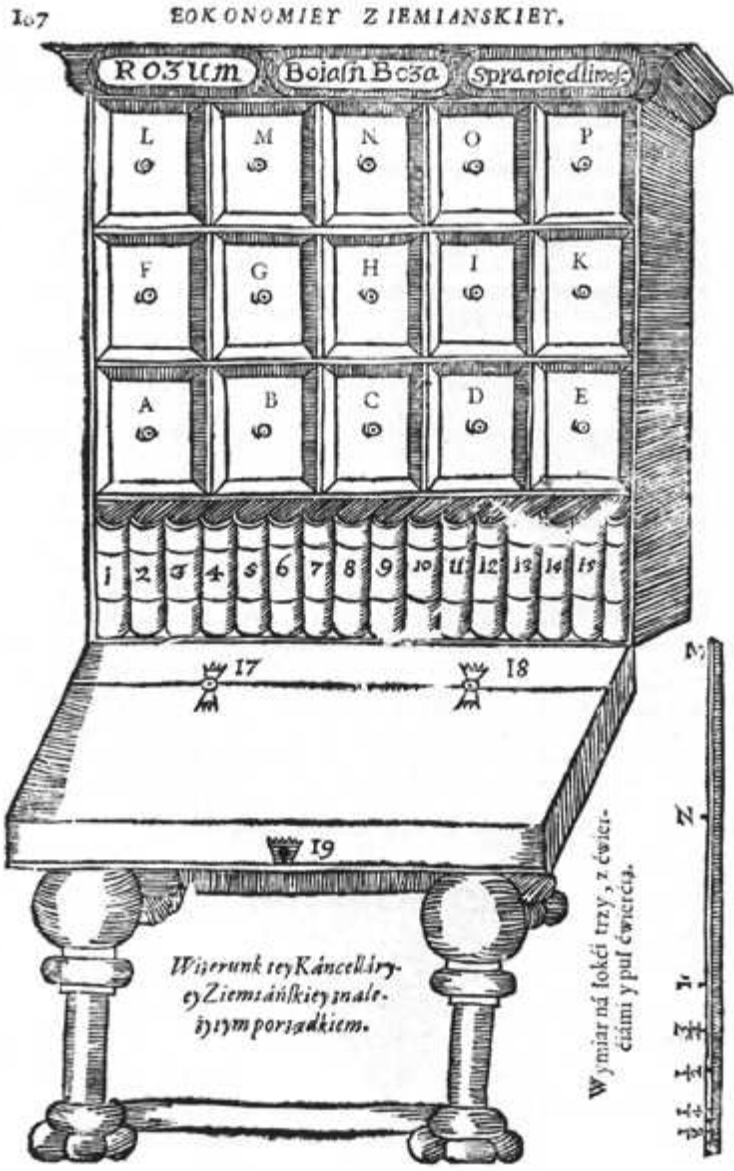
As we know, Poland lost its independence in the late eighteenth century. Most importantly, from the point of view of the book and the national culture in general, it lost state support, therefore, for a long time, its development depended primarily on grassroots, spontaneous, usually uncoordinated efforts, taking place within three different political and legal systems of the partitioning powers. The sense of national community, the culture, including the broadly understood book culture, proved to be strong enough that – despite many obstacles – not only its development was not interrupted but it continued successfully throughout the over 120 years of enslavement.<sup>4</sup> Polish book culture gained all the necessary conditions for further development in the reborn Polish state after 1918 – a single, large, national book market, state patronage, schooling and science, and finally, the library system emerged. However, when approaching Polish book culture in the first half of the twentieth century, one should pay attention to one very important issue – the culture was strong and developed exclusively among the gentry and the bourgeoisie, the latter of which was quite frail as a social class, and later – also among the intelligentsia, mainly derived from these two social groups. The vast majority of society – peasants – remained outside the literary culture, and only a small portion of this social group managed to overcome this barrier in the nineteenth century. This problem was not tackled by the Second Republic in the years 1918-1939, despite the best efforts, and was only managed by the communists. Readership was therefore not universal, as in Bohemia or Scandinavia, where illiteracy was eradicated already at the turn of the nineteenth century, and where literate masses acceded to systematic and intensive consumption of books, by borrowing, buying and reading. All that time, reading was basically “the lords’ entertainment”, as one of the researchers of the history of literature called it.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the fact that readership is primarily associated with upbringing and tradition, which is confirmed by many studies in different countries (readers educate readers), Polish readership is limited. It does not include the majority of citizens, especially in rural areas and among the elderly – that is, those raised by partly illiterate communities and generations. Dissemination and democratization of culture and education, which occurred during the communist period, proved to be shallow and unnatural in the

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4 M. Bogucka, *Kultura, naród, trwanie. Dzieje kultury polskiej od zarania do 1989 roku*, Warszawa 2008, pp. 247-372.

5 S. Siekierski, *Czytania Polaków w XX wieku*, Warszawa 2000, p. 21.



3. Chamber and the landlords' library by Jakub Kazimierz Haur (*Skład albo skarbiec znakomitych sekretów oekonomiey ziemianskiej...*), Cracow 1693, p. 167.

new reality where reading was in clear regression in certain social circles (farmers and the working class).

## Human and material losses in the years of war and partitions

The human and material losses which affected the entire book world during the partitions, the WWII and communism were equally severe. The invaders and occupiers fiercely looted and destroyed Polish libraries.. Russian, German and Austrian libraries and museums are filled with artifacts looted throughout the past two centuries, despite conducting restitutions. During WWII, the Germans and the Soviets deliberately destroyed the Polish collections and exterminated the intelligentsia. Polish losses in this period – both in the substance of private and public collections – are in the range of 70-90 percent.<sup>6</sup> As a result of forced resettlements and border changes after 1945, important centers of Polish librarianship and publishing – Lviv and Vilnius, on top of many smaller ones – found themselves outside the borders of the Polish state. Access to numerous collections was limited or even made impossible for decades, and even today it is sometimes problematic. The contemporary Polish territory covers 2/3 of the lands included in the Republic before 1939 and 1/3 of this territory found itself in the Third Reich during WWII. In varying degrees, this territory was associated with Germany over the past centuries and had been consistently germanized.

## Literary circulations and its Polish specificity

The years of partitions and occupation created specific types of literary circulations, directly affecting the shape of the literary life, excluding a part of the audience from the possibility of substantial contact with large areas of literature. Almost throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was a national circulation – generally limited due to censorship – a conspiracy circulation (in the communist period called the “second” one, bypassing the limitations) and an exile circulation, associated with

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6 B. Bieńkowska, *Losses of Polish libraries during World War II*, Warsaw 1994; *Biblioteki na wschodnich ziemiach II Rzeczypospolitej*. Informator, eds. B. Bieńkowska, U. Paszkiewicz et al., Poznań 1998.



4. The title page and the main print of *Pilgrim in Dobromil* by Izabela Czartoryska (1821), the most famous work of Polish literature „for the folk” (Digital Library of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin).



5. Reading room for children, Warsaw, 1930s (F. Czerwijowski, *Biblioteka Publiczna m. st. Warszawy. Stan na .IV.1936 roku*, Warszawa 1936, p. 72).



the largest centers of the Polish diaspora abroad. After the November Uprising 1830-1831, the Great Emigration included the greatest artists, together with Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński. During the communist period, one of the Polish emigrants was Czesław Miłosz, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1983.

## Secondary book market in Poland and its functions<sup>7</sup>

The place and function of the secondary market and book collecting look different than in the West, too. The basic features of this market usually come down to the marketing of historic substance, sold out editions and cheap books that provided an alternative to expensive new books. Meanwhile, in Poland, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this market significantly complemented the limited current offer of the official book market, which, for political reasons (censorship), did not satisfy the needs of Polish readers. This offer needed to be supplemented by old editions, on top of clandestine and underground publications, which were traded, among others, by used bookstores. In addition, the manuscript circulation, and moreover an oral one, allowed the Poles to effectively circumvent even the strictest bans.<sup>8</sup> Collectors' activity, in turn, has been dominated by national, independence trends to this day.

## The development of Polish librarianship<sup>9</sup>

Polish librarianship saw a period of formal and institutional development in the eighteenth century. University and school collections' reforms were introduced, and a Polish national library was established – the Public Library (one of the first in the world) – founded by the Załuski brothers. Moreover, a law on the legal deposit copy was introduced. This process, however, was brutally interrupted by the invaders. The Russians looted the Załuski collections. A modern, nationwide, Polish library network could develop only under the conditions of an independent state: after 1918. However, numerous and significant library foundations emerged in the meantime (founded by aristocrats who were collectors and patriots), among which the largest and still active today include: the Ossolineum

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7 G. Nieć, *Wtórny rynek książki w Polsce. Instytucje, asortyment, uczestnicy*, Kraków 2016.

8 Z. Szelaąg, *Literatura zabroniona 1832-1862. Zjawisko – rynek – rozpowszechnianie*, Kielce 1989.

9 A. Mężyński, *Z dziejów bibliotek w Polsce*, Warszawa 2018.



6. Book trade in the ruined Warsaw, 1944 (Warsaw Uprising Museum).



7. Queue to the bookstore for PWN Popular Encyclopedia – Poznań, Gwarna street, 1980s.

in Wrocław (the Ossoliński Library, until 1945 in Lvov), the Raczyński Library in Poznań, the Działyński Library in Kórnik near Poznań, and the Czartoryski Library in Cracow. Church and monastic libraries operated in addition to ones at schools and universities. In the second half of the nineteenth century, numerous “folk libraries” emerged and functioned, involved in the dissemination of the Polish book among the peasants and workers, however, everything depended on the political situation in the given partition, which varied to a great extent. During periods of increased anti-Polish campaigns – Germanization and Russification – their activities were significantly reduced, and sometimes even blocked. After 1918, the Poles began to organize the library network, including specialized libraries and university, other education, municipal and military collections. In 1928, the National Library was reactivated.<sup>10</sup> As already indicated, during war and occupation, a significant part of the collections was destroyed, and many others remained outside the newly demarcated borders of the country. After 1945, the Poles were forced to rebuild the devastated network of libraries and archives, and to organize some of it from scratch, since in some areas Polish books were scarce. In 1946, a decree on libraries came into force, on the basis of which a network of public libraries was introduced on provincial, district and municipal levels.<sup>11</sup> At the end of the communist era, in 1989, there was one library facility in Poland in per 2,087 inhabitants, which was a fairly good indicator. It should also be noted that the twentieth century, covering the years of the Second Republic and the Polish People’s Republic, was a period of dynamic development of library science and book science, and thus involved the professionalization of librarians and booksellers.

## Books and libraries during the communist period. Development and enslavement

The immediate historical point of reference for contemporary Poland is its territory and population acquired in 1945, which continues to this day. In many areas, at the institutional level, there is a continuity, a lot of links broken in 1945 were restored after 1989. The 1918-1939 Poland, however, differed significantly in terms of territory and population (where 35 percent were minorities), which was also reflected in the aspects of interest

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10 Z. Gaca-Dąbrowska, *Bibliotekarstwo II Rzeczypospolitej. Zarys problemów organizacyjnych i badawczych*, Warszawa 2007.

11 J. Maj, *Biblioteki publiczne 1945-1990 na tle innych instytucji kultury*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 18-33.



8. Book Fair in Krakow, 2017 (Polish Chamber of Books).



9. The Łukasz Górnicki Municipal Public Library in Oświęcim, commissioned in 2011 (photo: Lesser Poland Voivodeship).

herein, including illiteracy (which was the highest in the eastern part of the country, inhabited by Ukrainian- and Belarusian-speaking population). As already indicated, the fight against illiteracy was being already successfully carried out during the period of the Second Republic through schools and libraries, adult education and military service, with significant results.<sup>12</sup> In the new, territorial, political and demographic conditions, strengthened action to promote literacy took place after 1945, eliminating the problem entirely by the mid-1950s.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the reconstruction of the library system and the book market took place.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning, in the first three post-WWII years, under the rule of the communists, it functioned on the principles of the free market. The entities that participated in it were private, public and cooperative publishers, printers and bookstores. However, when the communist rule became firmly established, the authorities started stifling any private social and economic activity, the key to which was the broadly understood media market. Censorship was introduced, all independent, private journals, publishers and booksellers eliminated, a unified and centralized system of press and books introduced, subordinate to the Communist Party and its ideology. The ideology, based on the Soviet model, was applied in libraries and publishing.<sup>15</sup> Purges were carried out in libraries, withdrawing and often destroying banned publications.<sup>16</sup> State-owned publishing companies flooded the now state-owned bookstores with the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and other ideologists, but mainly with Soviet socialist-realist fiction. In the Stalinist period, when attempts were made to create a completely new reader, popular literature disappeared from the repertoire of books in general, while classics, in turn, were ideologically treated. Although after 1956 the ideological pressure eased, the numbers of titles and circulations of communist literature decreased, and the shelves of bookstores were again filled with (limited quantities) of romance and mystery novels. Until 1989, a large part of the publishing activity was ideological. This kind of literature did not enjoy popularity, nevertheless, it found its way to bookstores in no small quantities, where it remained as non-sellers, despite significant price reductions and free handouts. Such a publishing policy, in

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12 J. Landy-Tolwińska, *Analfabetyzm w Polsce i na świecie*, Warszawa 1961, pp. 59-79.

13 Ibidem, p. 83.

14 S.A. Kondek, *Papierowa rewolucja. Oficjalny obieg książek w Polsce w latach 1948-1955*, Warszawa 1999.

15 E. Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader. Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, Stanford 1997.

16 *Cenzura PRL. Wykaz książek podlegających niezwłocznemu wycofaniu 1 X 1959 r.*, afterword by Z. Żmigrodzki, Wrocław 2002.



10. Books for children issued as part of the Book Institute's campaign – „Mała Książka – Wielki Człowiek” (Little Book – The Great Man).

principle disregarding the needs and preferences of the reader, led to increasing market shortages and speculation,<sup>17</sup> which in the final phase of the People's Republic reached serious proportions. The book market in the People's Republic included the legal circulation (official and black market), the second market, involving publications related to the political opposition, Polish publishers abroad, and finally, the third market, unrelated to politics, mainly grassroots, functioning to counteract the shortages of popular and useful literature (e.g. dream dictionaries or pornography). For obvious reasons, the official circulation dominated in all respects. Publishers specializing in specific types of literature (fiction, science, linguistics, professional etc.)<sup>18</sup> were mostly based in Warsaw. Several publishing companies also operated in larger cities. The Catholic Church was the only institution which enjoyed a certain autonomy in this area. Both wholesale and retail were controlled by the state. More than eighty percent of the distribution was carried out by Dom Książki, a state-owned company, which had a network of bookshops across the country, while the rest was distributed in Poland and abroad by specialized companies handling scientific publishers (ORWNPAN), Ars Polona (exports), a few corporate bookstores' of some publishers, and shipping bookstores.<sup>19</sup> Distribution played a role, taking place in factories, in the countryside, among the members of organizations, covering mainly political literature. Although the eradication of illiteracy and the democratization of culture in the past period are undeniable facts, the position of the book culture was not easy. Contrary to appearances and popular ideas, taking into account the whole forty years, the "PRL" book market compared to other communist countries was pitiful, both in qualitative and quantitative terms.<sup>20</sup> Printing belonged to the slowest growing industries, and until the end of the era, all higher quality books were printed abroad. The high quality of the repertoire is often emphasized, as is the wealth of artistic and scientific offer of those years, in contrast to the present. This is a serious fallacy, for the contemporary offer in this area exceeds the pre-1989 one in every respect. The problem is that

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17 Speculation in the conditions of the socialist system was associated with buying out (often at the level of the producer or wholesale) the deficit goods and their sale at higher prices on the black market.

18 S. Siekierski, *Książka literacka. Potrzeby społeczne i ich realizacja w latach 1944-1986*, Warszawa 1992; P. Kitrasiewicz, Ł. Gołębiowski, *Rynek książki w Polsce 1944-1989*, Warszawa 2005.

19 *Współczesne polskie księgarstwo. Mały słownik encyklopedyczny*, [ed. R. Cybulski], Wrocław 1981.

20 Communist Poland remained at the bottom in the reports on the production of books in Communist European countries before Romania and Yugoslavia. For example, in 1985, 9,844 books were issued in Czechoslovakia, and in the much larger and more populous Poland, only 9,649 (R. Cybulski, *Książka na świecie. Produkcja wydawnicza w latach 1980-1986*, Wrocław 1990, p. 211).

in a free market, it disappears into the sea of popular, commercial offer, therefore, it is difficult to see looking at the shelves of bookstores.

## Constitutional coup, the transformation of 1989 and their impact on the market and the book culture<sup>21</sup>

In such a structure and organizational shape, already in a state of permanent crisis (shortages, speculation), the Polish book market survived until the coup that took place in Poland at the turn of 1990, and started the process of political transformation. In the period discussed, the political aspect meant, above all, the abolition of book censorship, which was officially announced on April 11, 1990. The most fateful, however, were ownership and structural changes, which meant a total breakdown of the controlled central state system of production and distribution of books, which happened extremely fast. Its individual cells died slower or quicker deaths: wholesale (Składnica Księgarska) overburdened with unattractive and outdated assortment, the sales network not always knowing the ropes of the free market and competition; finally, there was the overstaffing of the industry. The state wholesale network quickly and irretrievably collapsed. The individual Dom Książki bookstores either closed or were transformed (as a rule, privatized by their staff). It was similar with publishers, many of which still operate. They had to face competition from the newly emerging private companies, often referring to the conspiracy initiatives, and in time, foreign capital appeared also in this branch of the economy. The advantages of the “old” companies – publishers and booksellers – were certainly the experienced personnel, organization and existing premises. However, new entrants often better understood the new rules, which enabled them to make decisions quickly and accurately. They were free from habits formed in a completely different political situation. The main problem became the no longer restricted and thus increasing labor costs, the rising rents and maintenance of the premises, which quickly led to a reduction in the number of bookshops, especially in prestigious quarters of the big cities, where bookstores were replaced by luxury shops, restaurants, and casinos, as well as in small towns where in turn, the

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21 S. Siekierski, *Książka we współczesnej kulturze polskiej*, Pułtusk 2006; B. Klukowski, M. Tobera, *W tym niezwykłym czasie. Początki transformacji polskiego rynku książki (1989-1995)*, Warszawa 2013.



customer base was small. The surviving bookstores transformed and melted into stationery and gift shops, where the book offer was dominated by school textbooks. Nevertheless, the first three or four years were a period of very dynamic, but at the same time dramatic growth of the industry, which satisfied the needs of readers accumulated over the years by the restrictions on the books banned by censors, but also those had been unnoticed by the state publishers. In addition to the classics and historiography, philosophy and other humanities as well as social sciences, such types of literature that the state publishers had failed to meet the demand for, hit the market: reissues of pre-war and emigration editions, on top of translations of Western literature. This included useful books of all kinds (advice books, encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc.), all kinds of popular literature and pornography. A serious crisis occurred around 1993 when on the one hand, the market was already saturated, and on the other hand, economic pathologies characteristic of the first period of transformation intensified, mostly involving unreliable contractors. The bookstores did not pay the wholesalers, the wholesalers failed to pay the booksellers, and the latter the publishers: usually, everybody went bankrupt. In addition, foreign capital entered the market, mainly in the area of high-volume books, often – as in the case of books for children and young people – marginalizing the national publishers. This had a generally negative impact on the repertoire, especially in qualitative terms. A good example is the Western tycoon – Egmont – which dominated this segment of the market with its motley and banal offer. The hearts of the Polish readers, were in turn won by cheap romance novels. The market for all kinds of erotic and pornographic publications, practically banned under the communist rule, developed very quickly as well. Bookstores were literally flooded with Polish versions of various popular science and advice books, which seriously affected the development of native creativity in this area. Richly illustrated books printed on high quality paper, on popular world history, art history, natural sciences, geography and other fields of science, as well as all kinds of compendiums and advice books not only presented foreign perspectives, often not including Poland and matters related to it, but often also contained numerous errors and inaccuracies, which usually resulted from poor quality translation. In this initial period, an important role was played by book clubs, known and popular in the West, with Świat Książki as the leader, which until 2011 was part of the Bertelsmann Media company.

The first decade of transformation must, however, in spite of numerous pathologies taking place in the entire economy, be evaluated positively. During that time, the independent publishing movement and bookselling, pacified by the communists in the years 1948-1950, were successfully revived. The system was restored on the basis of post-communist, national

human and institutional substance. However, the old companies, often having a long and renowned tradition, were not reconstructed.

## Book culture in the wake of civilization and technological changes

At the same time, however, other transformation processes were taking place, affecting the discussed area directly and indirectly. The causes and effects were sometimes difficult to attribute unambiguously to the transformation, or to the global trends only. The Iron Curtain successfully blocked not only the flow of people, objects, and ideas, but also inhibited the processes that occurred over the years in the customs and culture, including those that were, in fact, negative. The return on the path of capitalist economy implied that the effects of these processes took place at a dramatically increased pace in Poland. Culture and media in the PRL were subordinated to ideology on the one hand, serving its promotion, but on the other hand they were dominated by highly artistic content, on top of educational and tutorial, virtually devoid of a commercial aspect. Popular culture and its products occupied the officially ignored and even despised margin, which was the complete reverse of the current situation. The generality of viewers and readers, who want simple and entertaining content, was forced to consume literary classics, which were also served as film adaptations in cinemas and on television. The best example of this is the lasting interest in nineteenth-century authors such as Józef Ignacy Krasiński, which almost instantly expired after 1990. As if that were not enough, the offer of popular literature in its lowest registers grew incredibly. Also, the offer of commercial TV, radio, and film (including VHS) content multiplied to a degree hitherto unprecedented.<sup>22</sup> In this case, reading, which was virtually the most popular and relatively easily accessible pastime and way of participation in culture throughout the twentieth century, began to lose its importance. The data from the 1990s<sup>23</sup> pointed to a gradual decline in readership and a changing repertoire. For obvious reasons, the reception of the foreign works changed as well. The previously privileged books translated from Russian, mainly for political reasons, were

22 It is a characteristic phenomenon in all post-communist countries, as already noted by Jiří Trávníček (Z. Šimeček, J. Trávníček, *Knihy kupovati... Dějiny knižního trhu v českých zemích*, Praha 2014, p. 401).

23 I. Koryś, O. Dawidowicz-Chymkowska, *Spoleczny zasięg książki w Polsce w 2010 roku. Bilans dwudziestolecia*, Warszawa 2012.

superseded by literature from the English-speaking area. The consumption of books was additionally influenced by the changes in the field of marketing. New forms of promotion and sales, along with the developments in the field of communication (telephones, mobile phones, fax machines), transport and shipping (delivery companies), were not known at all or blocked during the communist period.<sup>24</sup>

## Book culture in the digital age

The unprecedented technological breakthrough, however, came with the Internet, which covered Poland with its reach and influence at the turn of the millennium.<sup>25</sup> This impacted the promotion and distribution of traditional publishers as well as the emergence of a new way of disseminating text – and even its form. In the early 1990s, computer typesetting, its continuous improvement and increased availability, including reprographic devices (digital printing), made the issue of book publishing extremely easy. The vast majority of book trading, as well as the transmission of the text in general, is taking place in a hybrid manner, i.e. in the traditional and electronic form. These areas mutually simulate and penetrate. On the one hand, the Internet is a competitor to traditional forms of book culture at all stages: production, distribution (bookstores and libraries) and consumption. On the other hand, information technology and the Internet have no doubt also contributed to the improvement of all of the steps, including the conventional forms. Today's bookstores and libraries operating online will reach anywhere where the Internet works. The Internet has changed the face of book culture in all its manifestations in practice, and created a brand new one, only appropriate to the forms of existence and transmission of text. Internet book trading clearly weakened the already decimated network of bookstores and stationary used bookselling shops. Internet bookstores, in turn, are flourishing, and in recent times have opened more and more stationary order collection points. One depressing and terrible process is the withdrawal of books from public space. Traditional bookstores and used bookstores, if there are any, usually exist in less exposed places, or in shopping malls. Book fairs and book shows

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24 It should be noted that telecommunications across the whole communist period developed a bit slowly, and a private landline telephone was a privilege. Connectivity was of strategic importance, and its limitations facilitated control of the society. In 1987, the number of telephones in Cracow, then having a population of almost 750,000 residents, was 100,000.

25 M. Juza, *Kultura Internetu w Polsce. Od akademickich początków do upowszechnienia zjawiska*, Kraków 2012.

(although the latter are also only book fairs) are held in exhibition or sports centers remote from the downtowns. Books, buyers and readers have been thus virtually relegated to ghettos.

The number of published titles has remained at a similar level for years. There are approximately 35,000 titles annually. The sizes of the editions under free market conditions are essentially the publishers' secret, thus preparing the annual reports, the National Library does not collect and does not provide such data anymore. Although publishers are required to submit copies to the National Library, not all comply with this obligation. It must be assumed that every year at least a few thousand different kinds of prints remain unregistered. The number of residents per one published work is 1,053, which places Poland in a distant place among European countries. However, we must remember that the smaller the population of a country, the greater this factor is, for obvious reasons. Compared with Germany (967), Italy (918), France (799), and Russia (1279) it seems to be already quite balanced (data for 2017).<sup>26</sup> The number of registered publishers is huge, but in fact a few hundred are active, with a few dozens playing an important role, and the real leaders are about a dozen companies.

The repertoire is dominated by scientific books (40 percent) and fiction (29 percent). The remaining part (manuals, advice books, religion and esoteric, documentaries and essays, popular science and professional books) is relatively balanced and ranges between 5 and 7 percent. The former is mainly connected with universities and research institutions, and their editions in the vast majority are small (200-500 copies). Mainly thanks to them, the Polish market publishing is relatively decentralized and includes other cities than Warsaw. However, more than 40 percent of the titles are printed in the capital, in all segments. Cracow is the second Polish publishing center, where 12 percent of books come from. Of course, the segment of fine literature is internally very diverse, in which an important place is occupied by romance novels, thrillers, and finally, fantasy novels for children and young people. Children's book offer, which – as already indicated – was overwhelmed in the first decade by kitsch under the sign of Egmont and other commercial labels, has been reborn and is doing well. The contemporary Polish publishers of books for children and young people excel in terms of content and graphic layout. The book market generally operates on a commercial basis, however, a major role in the shaping of the repertoire is played by the state. In addition to scientific publications, which are financed through a variety of university activities and grant programs – government, local government, and the EU – are supported by public initiatives (involving both books and magazines) in the field of literature.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ruch wydawniczy w liczbach*, [vol.] 65: 2017, Warszawa 2018, p. 10.

A special role is played by Instytut Książki. Also, numerous translations of Polish literature into foreign languages are financed from the state budget. There are also books which are self-published by their authors.

Although, as a general trend, the number of libraries is decreasing, as is the number of individuals borrowing books, the situation of libraries in Poland is not bad. There are about 9,500 of them. In 2016, there was one library per 4,814 residents. Many of them have gained new, attractive, and modern premises, and are better equipped. Modern libraries are not limited to the collection and lending of books, but they are multi-purpose cultural and information centers, and meeting places for various events such as exhibitions, lectures, training, etc.

Readership surveys in Poland have a long tradition, dating back to the late nineteenth century, when the reading tastes of library members were studied. Considerable methodological progress took place in the interwar period. Systematic nationwide studies were taken in the early 1970s. Since then, the research has been carried out more or less systematically. Such studies are performed by the National Library, although in recent years, other entities have done that as well. According to the latest research by the National Library (2017),<sup>27</sup> 38 percent of the Polish population read at least one book over a period of one year, which is a relatively poor indicator, while intensive readers (7 and more books a year) amount to 9 percent. In the beginning of our century, readership remained at the level of 54–58 percent. It clearly began to decline in 2006 and stabilized around 2008. One must have in mind the fundamental problem, which is the growing transmission of all kinds of texts we read in the world wide web. Capturing this area and problems in the research is not easy, and it takes time to develop new methodologies. Another problem is the traditional understanding of books and reading, often not involving the digital realm.

All studies in Poland and around the world confirm that the key moment in the development of a positive attitude towards reading is childhood. Outside the home and family, little can be done, especially for the non-readers. Of course, a major role is played by the school and the social environment, the Church, and finally the media, however, 82 percent of readers learned this habit at home, while 87 percent of non-readers come from non-reader families. Given the earlier indicated facts from the history of the Polish book culture, these results should not be surprising, as they are a natural consequence thereof. Therefore, programs to promote reading are currently underway, focused on – and rightly so – supporting the most active readers (e.g. Book Discussion Clubs), as well as children and families.

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27 Biblioteka Narodowa, “Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2017 roku” Electronic document: <https://www.bn.org.pl/w-bibliotece/3413-38percent25-polakow-czyta-ksiazki.html>.

The Mała Książka-Wielki Człowiek [Little Book-Great Human Being] program implemented by Instytut Książki provides a book for every parent of a newborn baby, containing a selection of texts for children and a guide addressed to the parents. The program has been successful. The next step already applies to three-year-olds, who, together with a caretaker, are entitled to receive a baby reading kit at a library.

## Conclusion

The contemporary Polish book culture is, therefore, the sum of the historical experience of the state and the nation, whose fate over the last thousand years was varied, and often dramatic. We have a centuries-old tradition, but nevertheless a very diverse dynamics of development in particular periods; a serious and extensive material substance, albeit one that is heavily strained and dispersed, and a significant part of it is now outside the country. At the same time, also within our borders, there is a lot of foreign substance, mainly German, which has remained after the displaced Germans. Readership, as I have already pointed out, is not so widespread and deeply rooted as in some other countries, however, the size of Polish territory and population make the book market in Poland a considerably-sized one. The contemporary Polish culture is firmly rooted in tradition, however, it is undergoing far-reaching transformations and modifications related to technological and social change occurring in Poland and around the world. The transition period is behind us, as is the technological breakthrough associated primarily with the development of digital technology, which seems to be already completed, although many of the processes are still ongoing and involving more and more new areas. The individual elements are re-arranged in the spirit of convergence. Readership as such is, however, a much more complex process, and – above all – one taking place across generations, hence the prospect of a few or several years in this regard seems to be too insufficient.

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