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censorship of school textbooks in communist Poland

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The text explores the role of censorship in shaping the contents of school textbooks published in the Polish People's Republic. An analysis of archival documents of the censorship office, primarily from the Stalinist era, reveals that censors not only removed content undesirable from the communist authorities' perspective but also demanded that school textbooks be saturated with political propaganda. Although the materials concerning the post-1956 period are much more laconic, censorship operated until the end of the communist system in Poland, leaving its mark not only on the editorial footer of each book, where the censor's code was listed, but also influencing the ideological control exercised at every stage of a textbook's creation, at the desks of the authors, the publisher and the Ministry of Education.

Keywords: censorship, Cold War Poland, communist propaganda, school textbook

Introduction

In 1997, while pursuing my doctoral dissertation on political propaganda in school textbooks of the People's Poland (Wojdon, 2018a), I visited the Archives of Modern Records (AAN) in Warsaw to examine materials from the Ministry of Education. While I was there, the archivist asked me, "And don't you want to use the censorship files?" She brought me a thick paper inventory of the files of the Main Office of Control of Press, Publications and Shows – as the censorship office was officially called to avoid the negative connotations of linking the *people's democracy* with the term *censorship*. It revealed that the files were organised by publisher, which made this additional research much easier since, from the late 1950s, virtually all school textbooks in Poland were published by just two publishers.

Most of the materials included in the inventory dated from the Stalinist period (1949–1955). Until 1956, each reviewed textbook was subject to one or two reviews by censors. The reports were usually short, taking up one to three pages of manuscript or typescript. They were prepared on special forms containing, among other things, a bibliographic description of the work, including its circulation, and the note, "The review should, among other things, address the following issues: a) The subject matter and problems of the book; b) The ideological and socio-educational significance of the book." The reverse side started with a section titled "Proposed Interventions and Their Brief Justification," to list what specifically needed to be changed or deleted (with page numbers and wording). The report concluded with a recommendation to be chosen from "grant permission, refuse permission, grant permission after making the intervention", the reviewer's signature with a date, and finally, there was room for additional comments on the review and the office's decision (Wojdon, 2001, pp. 279–284 also provides detailed references to all other quotations to the censorship files used in this text).

The files at the AAN were not complete in the sense that they did not cover all the textbooks published in the period, but the amount of data they contained was sufficient to draw useful conclusions—and to be grateful to the archivist. This was especially true because, for many years afterward, the censorship materials were being processed by archivists, and historians were unable to use them.

Today they are the subject of not only historical but also linguistic analyses. For example, Anna Wiśniewska-Grabarczyk (2019) has recently analysed the poetics of censorship reviews. Even in the 1990s, from a layman's perspective, I noticed the clichéd nature of their language, which can be described as a specific form of the communist newspeak, a form of apparatchiks' jargon, similar to that found in party materials and the correspondence of Polish intelligence officers (see Wojdon, 2018b). Its usage was not so much about communication in the sense of conveying ideas or information—which it often obscured by the use of clichés, ritualistic formulations, and unsupported judgments—but rather attested to belonging into the ruling caste, not coincidentally called the nomenclature. This observation is in line with the claims of Aleksander Pawlicki (2001, pp. 51-68) who analysed the legal base and organisational structures of the censorship office and concluded that the censorship "was in fact subordinated to the propaganda branch of the communist party, and referred to the nominal government centre only in organisational matters, never in substantive ones" (Pawlicki, 2001, p. 51). Pawlicki further singled out ten principles that were followed by the censorship office. His first principle was the "partyism of information" (Pawlicki, 2001, p. 51), i.e., following the current trends in the communist party propaganda.

In my own research, I read the files "as a historian" (Wineburg et al., 2012)—taking into consideration the purposes they were intended to serve, the realities in which they were created, corroborating them with the textbook content I was already familiar with, and reflecting on the mental portrait of their creators, i.e., the censors. Pawlicki's principles, to which I refer, confirm that my textbook-related findings are consistent with his broader analysis of censorship practices. Due to time and procedural constraints, I examined only the files labeled as related to textbook publishers, applying a single selection criterion—the primary school level of the textbooks in question. Despite these limitations, the analyzed material provided valuable insights into the mechanisms and principles of communist censorship in Poland. It confirmed the totalitarian nature of the regime, which assigned a crucial role in shaping the communist "new man" to education, and particularly to state-controlled school textbooks. Considering the eventual failure of communism, and especially its limited support among the younger generations who were raised within that educational system, these practices can be regarded as largely ineffective, and at times even grotesque. Perhaps they may serve as an argument in current debates on state control over education.

Findings

To Remove

Among specific words, sentences, and expressions that were required to be removed from the textbooks, the names of objects protected by military secrets occurred most often: certain industrial plants (the Staszic coal mine, the synthetic gasoline factory in Dwory near Oświęcim, the chemical plant in Knurów), military installations (the airport in Szczecin, the railway station in Łosinka, the station in Żurawica near Przemyśl), dams, locations of certain mineral deposits or information about their absence in Poland, and numerical data (e.g., information on ore mining in Poland in 1949, the

costs of building the W-Z freeway in Warsaw, the number of power plants in Poland, the length of the canal on the Odra river in Koźle). Other censors required the rewriting of a sentence that revealed the uncouth behaviour of a peasant child, and the removal of a line suggesting that Soviet bombs were falling on Warsaw, as well as the sentence "Someone sang loudly and shrilly" used in reference to partisans from the communist-controlled People's Army (quoted in Wojdon, 2021, p. 284). The word "Germans" was ordered to be replaced with "Hitlerites" when referring to World War II (Wojdon, 2021, p. 284)—Pawlicki would assign it to the ninth principle of the censorship operation: "linguistic purity" (Pawlicki, 2001, pp. 65–66).

Censors objected to the religious content in the textbooks. For example, they deemed there to be too much God in Gustaw Morcinek's readings about miners and proposed that they be replaced with something more production-related and contemporary (Wojdon, 2001, p. 281). Undesirable "religious accents" (*akcenty religianctwa*, quoted in Wojdon, 2001, p. 281) also included a church among the topographical symbols in a geography textbook.

These interventions were consistent with the criteria set forth in the decree of July 5, 1946, which formally established the censorship office. In fact, it operated from the very beginning of communist rule in Poland. Interestingly, it was first located in the Ministry of Public Security, then subordinated to the government presidium. According to the law, the office was supposed to stop the publications that were deemed to "pose a threat to the political system, present hostile propaganda, reveal secret information, act to the detriment of the international relations of Poland, violate the law or good manners, or mislead the reader." (Pawlicki, 2001, pp. 31-32).

I suppose that data about industrial plants or production statistics were originally included in the textbooks not to reveal secret information, but to boast about the achievements of the socialist, collective, state economy, as required by the curriculum and abundant in press and radio propaganda of the time. The reference to Soviet bombs was considered to be detrimental to Poland's international relations, in the same way as any other critical remark about the Soviet Union or Russians. It is difficult to say under which section a demand that the father of the main character from a reading primer in Stalinist times could not be an engineer but only a worker fell (Wojdon, 2021, p. 5). Perhaps making an architect member of the main character's family would have constituted a "threat to the political system," (Pawlicki, 2001, p. 32) that promoted workers' rule, or perhaps it would have "misled" (Pawlicki, 2001, p. 32) young readers.

Generally, however, the demands that certain contents be erased were relatively few in the files analysed—perhaps a result of the process in which school textbooks reached the censors' desks in the final stages of their work (see Wojdon, 2015 for the details of this process). They had been written or edited by authors who had made a conscious decision to support the system and who wanted to continue the collaboration with the publisher—hence, they were engaged in self-censorship from the very beginning of the process. Their texts then passed through internal review at the publishing house and in the next stage were approved by special commissions of the Ministry of Education, which appointed academic experts and subject-specific specialists, loyal to the communist party. This was where fundamental, sometimes heated, discussions took place about what certain books lacked in order to become effective propaganda tools, which authors could and couldn't be included (some authors disloyal to the system were banned a priori in order to avoid corrupting the public, but also to deprive them of earnings from publication), which topics were missing because no one wanted to write about them (e.g., Poland's recent history), or which existing works could or couldn't be included. For example, a 19th century poem with the word God was

deemed only to be suitable for secondary school, not for primary school – a factor of atheist propaganda.

To Add

Textbook censors were still busy during the Stalinist era because censorship during that period was not only responsible for ensuring that undesirable content did not appear in education, but also for ensuring that desirable content was included. Thus, one can speak of active or creative censorship, which not only deleted but also added or demanded the addition of new content.

Such textbooks are intended not only to teach students the academic material prescribed by the curriculum, but above all to instil in young people the principles of socialist morality and the foundations of a materialist worldview – in a way accessible to young people, wrote a censor about a volume of fifth-grade readings (quoted in Wojdon, 2001, p. 280). Another reader was disqualified altogether because "although the textbook has undeniable merits, without political (ideological) depth, it will not meet the requirements we must impose on schools." (quoted in Wojdon, 2001, p. 280)

The requirements were truly extraordinary—consider those formulated for a reading primer, the first book for the youngest children:

> *In the entire primer one cannot find a peace dove with an accompanying reading, the Children's Day is not mentioned though it is celebrated in all the schools, there is no reading concerning Korean and Chinese children about whom a child hears a lot, too little space (one reading) is devoted to the Soviet friends. Besides the work done by individual craftsmen, children could become acquainted with the work done collectively by shoemakers, tailors or bricklayers. (quoted in Wojdon, 2015, p. 189)*

Introducing propaganda elements into mathematics and physics books was considered difficult, yet desirable. Such efforts were met with praise. It was a plus when "the previously common examples from 'private initiative' were eliminated in the exercises, replacing them with examples from cooperatives or socialised enterprises." (quoted in Wojdon, 2021, p. 283)

Other textbook authors were required to introduce or expand the material devoted to the Soviet Union, May Day, the October Revolution, and revolutionaries. "The foundations of Stalin's plan for transforming nature in the USSR are too little developed and unclearly formulated," (Book review form (Geography, grade 7) in Archiwum Akt Nowych, Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, File I/144, 31/14 (1950), p. 359) or

> A shortcoming of the excerpts is the insufficient reference to the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat; the role of the party, the significance of the Union of Polish Youth, and the Scouts are not strongly emphasised. There is too little mention of Polish-Soviet friendship and cooperation and people's democracy. There is too much sentiment, too little militancy. (Book review form (*Dom i świat*, grade 6) in Archiwum Akt Nowych, Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, File I/144, 31/17 (1951), p. 410).

Censors demanded science textbooks adhere to the so-called materialist theory. Writing "in the style of pure science", or in a style that was "report-like", "objective", or "classless" (quoted in Wojdon, 2001, p. 281) was deemed inappropriate. With reference to a geography book: "Although the author strives to meet the demands of the present, the textbook essentially does not differ from traditional pre-war textbooks. The only new element is the political commentary." (Book review form (Geography, grade 7) in Archiwum Akt Nowych, Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, File I/144, 31/14 (1950), p. 357). Censors paid attention to the order of topics discussed when a certain country was introduced in a textbook. Only the following arrangement was considered consistent with Marxist methodology: first geographical environment (including minerals), then industry, agriculture, and finally communication. The materialist approach to the shape and motion of the Earth was by no means to be limited to the assertion that the Earth is round and revolves around the sun. In this area—the censor suggested—"it was necessary to emphasize the centuries-old tragic struggle (Copernicus, Bruno, Galileo) between progressive scientific thought and the obscurantism of church idealists." (quoted in Wojdon, 2001, pp. 281-282). A biology textbook was praised for its "materialistic approach" to human origins (Book review form (Raabe, Biology 7) in Archiwum Akt Nowych, Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, File I/374, 31/19 (1953), p. 24).

But the creative, socialist approach to nature was most crucial. Claims that landscape influenced economic development, the location of industry, or the standard of living were considered unacceptable. It was necessary to demonstrate how humans transform the environment and adapt it to their needs, especially as this occurred in socialist systems, primarily in the Soviet Union. One of the tools for transforming nature was, according to the communist Party ideology of the time, the application of the principles of the Soviet Michurinism. Both the Ministry of Education and the censorship office took effort to ensure that Michurin, Lysenko, and their theories found their proper place and proper exposure in textbooks. The goal was to show how these achievements were utilised under socialism and squandered under capitalism. The following statement raised objections: "Michurin, a contemporary of [an American agronomer] Burbank, enjoys great and deserved fame … Putting Michurin on the same level as Burbank has a cosmopolitan connotation. It was necessary to emphasize that Michurin's science is the leading one." (quoted in Wojdon, 2001, p. 282).

In other fields, too, care was taken to clearly contrast the blocs located on either side of the Iron Curtain. When presenting the White Sea Canal and the Panama Canal in geography, it was necessary to emphasise that the former served peace, the latter war. It was important to emphasise the differences in the situation of indigenous peoples exploited in the colonies and the inhabitants of Soviet Siberia, who enjoyed the protection of the communist regime. When describing capitalist countries, the prevailing principle was to emphasise that their wealth stemmed from the exploitation of the colonies and the indigenous working class, and that all contemporary life unfolded in the shadow of economic crises, class struggle, and the threat of American aggression. The "sentimental" approach to Scandinavian countries raised significant concerns, as also their manifestations of capitalist injustice should have been highlighted, according to the censors' demands (Wojdon, 2001, p. 282).

The West, though rarely, appeared in foreign language textbooks that were developed and published in Poland in the early 1950s (later foreign language instruction in primary schools was limited to the Russian language). One textbook in particular raised concerns, allegedly portraying the lives of

residents of Anglo-Saxon countries in an overly idyllic way: a miner had his own large house and went to a match or club after work; the children of an American chauffeur rode their bikes, their house had an electric stove, and a farmer friend owned a tractor. These texts, the reviewer wrote, "illustrate the favourable situation of the working masses in both capitalist countries, distorting the child's correct view of the real situation of the working class in the West." (quoted in Wojdon, 2001, p. 283). The same textbook was elsewhere deemed "harmful" (quoted in Wojdon, 2001, p. 283).

With regard to the Soviet Union, censors were vigilant in ensuring that it was covered extensively and well. It was a flaw when the author of a geography book used Soviet examples "only when absolutely necessary" (quoted in Wojdon, 2001, p. 283), when the Sahara desert served as an example of desert irrigation plans, rather than areas of Soviet Asia, and when R. Amundsen rather than the Russian traveller Papanin was presented as a polar explorer. The fact that the mathematics book cited Watt rather than Polzunov as the inventor of the steam engine was considered a factual error. It was even recommended that a quote from the Prime Minister's speech be changed, which, when discussing Poland's foreign policy, did not mention the Soviet Union (all examples with detailed archival references in Wojdon, 2001, p. 283).

The content of the published textbooks indicates that these recommendations were taken into account. As a result, the most outstanding biologists of all time appeared to be Ivan Michurin and Stalin's favourite, the charlatan Lysenko (DeJong-Lambert, 2009). Soviet physicists and chemists were written about in textbooks for these subjects, and in a seventh-grade world geography textbook, the USSR appeared on one-sixth of the pages. Despite this, the censor deemed the textbook to have failed to adequately address the political system, the admirable position of the Soviet man and, in the subsection on the Polish-Soviet alliance, it focused exclusively on the superpower status of the Soviet Union, omitting the ideological aspects.

To Adapt

Censorship during the Stalinist era also ensured that propaganda information was updated and consistent with the latest knowledge and constantly changing party guidelines. It corresponded with Pawlicki's first principle but also his third principle: "topicality of information" (Pawlicki, 2001, p. 55). For example, biology book reviews repeatedly raised the issue of the Colorado potato beetle, which was limited to the 1940s in textbooks. Meanwhile, special attention was recommended to the alleged American airdrops of the beetle onto the GDR in 1950, when it was believed to have spread to Polish fields in large quantities.

The lack of new, fresh texts was also complained about. "Historical texts, such as 'Swedes in Warsaw', as well as excerpts from [the 19th century novelist] Sienkiewicz (about Mr. Zagłoba), should be replaced with information about the October Revolution and Generalissimo Stalin, prepared specifically for the exercises." (quoted in Wojdon, 2001, p. 281). It was also suggested that reading material be commissioned from the bricklayer-foreman, Krajewski. Also missing were texts about the party, the Scouts, and the Pioneers, Polish-Soviet cooperation, the comparison of the situation of working people in pre-war Poland and the People's Republic of Poland, agricultural cooperatives (Polish version of kolkhozes), July 22nd (communists coming to power in Poland in 1944), the new constitution (of Poland in 1952, authorized by Stalin), the Congress of Young Leaders, and the National Front. However, on other occasions publishers complained to the

Ministry of Education that writers did not want to create commissioned literature in the spirit of socialist realism, which would also have high, or at least acceptable literary value.

Besides the substantive content, the censors also criticised the style in which political matters were written. Sometimes, they were satisfied with mere contents: “Stories and descriptions depicting life in the GDR, although dull and uninteresting, raise no political objections.” At other times, they were not: “New insertions sometimes create a clash in the overall picture” or “Social and political accents are correctly brought out, but without any particular sharpness.” (all quotations with detailed archival references in Wojdon, 2001, p. 284).

Conclusions

It appears that censors’ demands regarding the textbook contents were in line with at least half of the ten principles of censorship singled out by Aleksander Pawlicki (2001). Principles 1 (partyism of information), 3 (topicality of information) and 9 (linguistic purity) have already been discussed. His fourth principle stated that “information be formation” (Pawlicki, 2001, pp. 56-58). The point was to avoid wasting paper and textbook space, as well as time—in this case, teaching time—on conveying ideologically irrelevant content. For the same reason, the ideological uselessness of simple entertainment, jazz and American popular music in general were censored at the time: what’s the point of writing or singing about someone just falling in love if music can be used to encourage people to work?

In the case of textbooks, the censors did not limit their interventions to prohibiting, deleting, or cancelling, but they also pointed to the blank spots to be filled and even suggested contents to be inserted, thus performing what I called creative censorship.

During the 1956-1959 thaw, censorship virtually ceased. In the following decade, the format of the censorship records pertaining to textbooks changed. The files merely included decisions (always positive) on a short application form submitted by the publisher. Textbooks, as all books officially published during that period, bore the censor’s designation in the editorial footnotes but its meaning was hidden to the public, in accordance with Pawlicki’s tenth and last principle: “censorship non-existence” (Pawlicki, 2001, pp. 66-68). Other principles, not mentioned in this text, applied mostly to the niche publications that permitted certain degree of liberalism, but not to the mass circulations of school textbooks.

Censorship continued until the end of the Polish People’s Republic. Its impact on the Polish culture, on individual authors and artists, but also on readers and society at large is a matter of contemporary research and debate. Anna Wiśniewska-Grabarczyk (2023) even managed to present its complexity in the form of a children’s book.

Today, Polish teachers are free to choose teaching materials for their classrooms. Nevertheless, the publishers still need to apply for approval from the Ministry of Education in order to obtain the official textbook status for their books. The approval is based on the experts’ (not censors’) reviews, yet political factors may still play a role, particularly in the humanities.

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