

The Occupational Strikes in the Dąbrowa Basin of April 1951: Stalinist Industrialization Against the Traditions of the Polish Working Class

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Abstract

Given the significance of strikes in the history of communist Poland, the strikes that occurred during the era of high Stalinism (1948-53) have received remarkably little scholarly attention. This article deals with one of the most significant strike waves of that period: the occupational strikes that broke out in the Dąbrowa basin after the regime extended the working day in the mines by one hour in April 1951. What lent additional salience to these strikes was that the Dąbrowa basin, nicknamed the “Red Basin” on account of its radical traditions of industrial protest, had been a communist stronghold in interwar Poland and that many card-carrying communists participated in the strikes. The article demonstrates that the strikes were the culmination of a process whereby the “aristocracy of labor” of seasoned activists turned against a regime that increasingly relied on younger migrants from the rural provinces in its campaigns to raise production. If the historical struggles of the miners in the Dąbrowa basin were instrumental in triggering the strikes, however, the article also makes clear how representatives of the regime could invoke these struggles to bring the strikes to an end.

By early 1951, things were already starting to look bleak for the Six Year Plan that Communist Poland had launched the previous year.¹ To be sure, each major industrial sector had duly outperformed its target for 1950, but there was real concern over the sustainability of the industrialization drive inherent in the plan. For where overall industrial output had risen by 30 percent, coal production had only increased by 5 percent.² Given the crucial role that coal played in both keeping other industries afloat and in financing imports, this raised the specter of heavily politicized planning targets not being met in the near future. Under these circumstances, the Polish government decided to intervene in the coal sector by setting up the “Operation W” (W short for *węgiel*, or coal): a secret plan to extend shifts in the coal mines by one hour beginning April 1, 1951. It was only at the very last minute, during hastily convened shop floor meetings in the last days of March, that coal miners were informed of this imminent change to their timetable.

The result was a massive backlash in the historical heartlands of the Polish labor movement: the Dąbrowa basin, i.e., the region at the heart of the Upper Silesian coalfield, comprising the cities of Dąbrowa Górnicza and Sosnowiec as well as the Będzin district. When the new timetable was implemented

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regardless of the protestations that workers had raised, this basin saw what was one of the most significant strike wave in Stalinist Poland. In the general upheaval that swept the region, the Czerwona Gwardia, Grodziec, Jowisz, and Kazimierz-Juliusz pits were occupied by their workforce. It took the personal intervention of a government minister and, in one case, the army to bring the occupations to an end. What lent additional salience to these occupational strikes was that the Dąbrowa basin, nicknamed the “red basin” on account both of its prominent role in the 1905 revolution and of the many strike waves it witnessed during the interwar era, had always occupied a special place in Communist imagery and rhetoric. To have the very workers who were constantly hailed as the revolutionary vanguard of the industrial proletariat in state propaganda, among them many card-carrying communists, revolt against the government represented a major embarrassment for the Communist regime in Poland.

For all of the tensions and contradictions within the postwar Polish Communist movement these strikes exposed, they have thus far largely been ignored in the English-language historiography of “People’s Poland.”³ What little work exists in Polish, moreover, fails to offer much in terms of analysis. One short article dealing specifically with the occupational strikes provides a solid background to and chronology of the main events, but its interpretation of these remains firmly rooted in the totalitarian school of thought.⁴ More general histories of the labor movement or industrial unrest in postwar Poland tend to focus on the anecdotal dimensions of these strikes. Both Andrzej Paczkowski and Jędrzej Chumiński point out that the strikers sang religious songs to drown out the speeches of arriving party and trade union officials, without delving much deeper into the specific dynamics of the strikes themselves.⁵ The same is true for those biographical studies that are primarily interested in what the strikes meant for the political career of Edward Gierek, the future First Secretary of the (Communist) Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR). These studies stress how Gierek, at the time a young and ambitious functionary in the Silesian PZPR, made a name for himself by helping to bring the occupation of the Kazimierz-Juliusz pits to an end.⁶ In doing so, however, these works fail to properly engage with the most interesting account of the strikes, and their broader significance for the Polish labor movement, that Gierek provided in a series of in-depth interviews conducted after 1989.⁷

What is lacking, therefore, is an exploration of the deeper social roots and lasting impact of the April 1951 strikes in the Dąbrowa basin. This is symptomatic of a wider disregard for the strikes that swept Poland in the era of high Stalinism. Given the significance of strikes to the broader history of “People’s Poland”—Łódź 1947, Poznań 1956, Gdynia 1970, Gdańsk 1980—the industrial struggles that occurred during the period between the imposition of a single-party dictatorship in 1948 and the onset of destalinization in 1956 have received surprisingly little attention.⁸ If, for example, the leading work on Polish society in the first postwar years devotes an entire chapter to strikes as “an elementary form of worker resistance,”⁹ its “companion”¹⁰ for the Stalinist era assigns a

mere two paragraphs to the theme.¹¹ This scant scholarly concern for the strikes of the late 1940s and early 1950s has often been excused by the sharp decrease in their occurrence, dropping from a high of 565 in 1946 to just 30 in 1949. Yet, official numbers do not tell the whole story and the downward trend seems to be due, at least in part, to a different accounting method. For in the repressive atmosphere of high Stalinism, in which even using the concept “strike” was politically pernicious, workers increasingly came to define their (mostly short-lived) work stoppages as “breaks” (*przerw w pracy*) rather than strikes.¹²

In this sense, the occupational strikes of April 1951 represented a return to more traditional forms of industrial protest. This article demonstrates how the strikes marked the culmination of a process whereby the interwar “aristocracy of labor” of skilled union activists reclaimed the leadership of the labor movement in the Dąbrowa basin. In the many strikes of the first postwar years, these activists had mostly taken a backseat role—determined to give the “Polish road to socialism”¹³ proclaimed by the Communist-led coalition government a chance. Yet, the advent of Stalinism from 1947 onward increasingly turned the old stalwarts of the interwar labor movement against the regime. As the Upper Silesian coalfield became the testing ground for Soviet-inspired production methods and saw a massive influx of younger rural migrants to carry out these programs, the aristocracy of labor in the Dąbrowa basin found both its hard-fought working conditions and its social status under attack.

To be sure, these two themes—resistance to the Sovietization of the economy among skilled workers and rural-to-urban migration in the context of the Stalinist industrialization drive—have been studied extensively for Poland, as well as Eastern Europe more generally.¹⁴ What makes the case of the Dąbrowa basin particularly interesting is that it brings together the two themes. Unlike in those parts of Silesia that had become an uninhabited no-man’s land following the expulsion of the sizeable German population,¹⁵ or the “socialist new towns”¹⁶ that were built from scratch, after all, the Communist authorities could hardly start from a blank slate in the Dąbrowa basin. This was rather where the old working-class Poland came face to face with the new; and the aristocracy of labor was not about to surrender its position without a fight.

Insofar as the article builds on the work that Padraic Kenney has conducted on (strikes in) postwar Łódź and Wrocław to argue that worker resistance to state socialism was more likely to emerge there where the labor movement had deeper roots,¹⁷ it also shows how the invocation of these very roots offered the regime a way out of crisis situations. Much as established working-class communities were a thorn in the side of the Stalinist modernization project, after all, communist officials often found it easier to find a common language with these communities than with the disparate groups that made up the various melting pots elsewhere across industrial Poland. In fact, the article illustrates how arriving party elites drew on the historical struggles fought by the miners of the Dąbrowa basin to convince them to abandon their occupations. That these efforts were for the most part successful and ushered in a largely peaceful end to the occupations does not mean that the events of April 1951

were any less significant than the better-known strike waves in “People’s Poland.” If anything, the occupational strikes in the Dąbrowa basin demonstrate how persuasion was a powerful weapon in the arsenal of the regime, thereby helping to explain the inner workings of Communist control over the Polish working-class and why that control lasted as long as it did.

The run-up

In the aftermath of the war, strikes had been the order of the day in the Upper Silesian coal mines. With desperate shortages of food, coal, and clothing tormenting its workforce, successive strike waves swept the region in 1945 and 1946.¹⁸ A report drawn up by the leadership of the Coal Miners’ Union in January 1946 vividly describes the problems that trade unionists were facing in maintaining order. The lack of bread, the rise of the state-mandated prices for other foodstuffs, the high cost of clothing, and broken promises regarding wage increases, the report noted, had created an incendiary situation in recent weeks. There had already been wildcat strikes at the Bierut, Jan Kanty, Kościuczko, Sobiecki, Grodziec, Jowisz, and Bobrek pits, while miners at the Milowice pits were planning to walk out the following day. In their efforts to reason with striking workers, trade union leaders had seen all sorts of “attacks” leveled at them. In the Dąbrowa basin, for example, coal miners had berated trade unionists for having “sold out Silesians” in the collective agreements they had entered into. In fact, there was a “distinct anti-union mood” across the region. Compared to 1918, “when the [material] situation was one hundred times worse,” miners simply did not want to “listen to or understand [the problems of] the current postwar era.”¹⁹

What made the strikes that broke out in the wake of the Second World War so difficult to control for trade unions was their spontaneous and often leaderless nature.²⁰ It was “characteristic,” explained an April 1946 report of the security services in Silesia province, “for strikes to erupt without any strike trend having manifested itself beforehand.” For miners were “easily influenced by troublemakers.”²¹ If the identity of these “troublemakers” was kept (deliberately) unclear in such reports,²² the postwar strikes certainly did not unfold along the same lines as their interwar predecessors. The miners’ strikes of the 1920s and 1930s had mostly been drawn-out affairs, during which miners were represented by strike committees under the helm of seasoned communist or socialist activists.²³ By comparison, the strikes of the first postwar years were mostly short-lived and chaotic. In many cases, strike committees were not even formed and the old veterans of the labor movement were barely involved in their organization and running. During an April 1946 strike at the General Zawadzki pits in Dąbrowa Górnicza, for example, all members of the (Communist) Polish Workers’ Party (PPR) and some members of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) had continued to work.²⁴ Insofar as communists and socialists did fully participate in strikes elsewhere, they were more likely to be passive bystanders than ringleaders.

Instead, it was often relative newcomers to industrial or public life who were the driving force behind the postwar wildcat strikes. In the Dąbrowa basin, miner's wives played a particularly prominent role during such strikes. Many strikes were triggered by miner's wives blocking the entrances to pits, only allowing their husbands to go to work once certain bread- and-butter demands had been met.²⁵ Such strikes have long been viewed exclusively in function of the postwar food crisis, but also testify to the more assertive attitude that women took in industrial bargaining in the aftermath of the Second World War.²⁶ For even when strikes did originate on the shop floor, women frequently dominated strike meetings. This was found by managers at the Klimontów pits in Sosnowiec after its workforce had gone on strike in March 1946, demanding an explanation for the lack of food and their low wages. A general assembly was called during which the director of the local foodservice and the works council addressed both issues. Yet, when management asked the miners to return to work afterward, it was their wives who, having partaken in the assembly, answered that "their husbands are hungry and therefore cannot work."²⁷

This sort of strike, born out of sheer desperation and misery, was to become far less prevalent in the coal sector from 1947 onward. In view of the severe shortage of manpower in the coal industry, the state started offering various incentives to attract labor to the coal mines. By 1947, accordingly, coal miners had overtaken metallurgical workers as the best-paid industrial workers. What is more, the Mineworkers' Charter (*Karta Górnika*), adopted by the Polish government in November 1949, awarded coal miners a whole series of special privileges and social benefits. None of this is to argue that life somehow became prosperous for Polish coal miners.²⁸ All sorts of shortages remained, especially in the provision of the meats and fats that had always been a staple of the coal miner's diet, and the need to queue up for such scarce everyday necessities became a permanent feature of "People's Poland." Complaints about poor living standards therefore continued to be widespread during strikes and worker protests. Yet, there no longer was the prospect of acute destitution and actual starvation that had triggered so many of the postwar strikes.

Fresh industrial conflicts were quick to arise in the Upper Silesian coalfield, however, as the state placed ever-increasing demands on coal miners. In the context of the Three Year Plan, inaugurated by the Polish government in 1947, after all, the coal mines were the first to be subjected to Soviet-inspired labor competitions. These were launched in July 1947, when the press published an open letter by Wincenty Pstrowski, a miner at the Jadwiga pits in Zabrze who had outperformed his monthly target by 273 percent in the month of April. In the letter, Pstrowski challenged other miners to produce even more than he had. What followed was a massive state-sponsored campaign in which miners were impelled to engage in labor competition (*współzawodnictwo*) with their colleagues, in the hope of earning monetary bonuses, getting promoted, and being publicly decorated as a "work leader" (*przodownik pracy*). The aim was clearly for Pstrowski to become the Polish counterpart to Aleksei

Stakhanov, the original “labor hero” whose record-breaking coal extraction had provided the impetus for the 1930s Stakhanovite labor competitions in the Soviet Union. These plans were stymied, however, when Pstrowski fell ill in early 1948 and subsequently died in April. Pstrowski’s fate, rumored to be the consequence of overworking, was much discussed among Silesian coal miners.²⁹ It was with reference to Pstrowski that miners at the Silesia pits in Rybnik voiced their opposition to labor competition in January 1948. “We want to live,” explained the miner who had been delegated by his colleagues to raise the matter with management; “we do not want to lie in the hospital like Pstrowski. We do not want the press to write about us or about other pits. We will work, but away with all labor competition.”³⁰

Unlike the earlier subsistence-inspired agitations, the protests against labor competition first and foremost stemmed from the “aristocracy of labor”³¹ of older and more experienced workers. In fact, resistance to the Sovietization of the shop floor was often led by long-standing party members and/or labor movement activists. During a September 1948 meeting of PPR activists in Silesia province, Zenon Nowak, the first secretary of the provincial PPR, pointed to “very disturbing developments” in the statistics that had been compiled about labor competition in the coal mines. For “in a whole series of pits,” the percentage of non-party workers involved in labor competition was much higher than that of PPR members, with numbers for the PPS “still worse.”³² Within the PPS, certainly, even those at the very top of the economic apparatus seemed to have their doubts about the way in which labor competition had been introduced in the coal mines. Speaking at a conference for target-busting miners in October 1947, Antoni Macura, the socialist deputy president of the Central Executive of the Coal Industry, claimed that Pstrowski and other labor heroes had been “conned” into believing they had achieved more than double their target. “As an old miner”, after all, he felt that “the maximum extraction was 180 percent [of the target].”³³

This sort of skepticism toward the achievements of labor heroes, as well as the purposes of labor competition, was widespread among rank-and-file party members in the Silesian coal mines. For these workers, the constant calls to produce more, work harder, and make longer hours that accompanied the introduction of Stakhanovism in Poland were all too reminiscent of industrial life under prewar capitalism. During a joint meeting of PPR and PPS activists at the Wieczorek pits in Katowice, one PPR member declared that “labor competition constitutes the greatest of exploitations; it increases unemployment and prolongs working hours.”³⁴ In the pushback against labor competition in the mining sector, respected workers like foremen often took the lead. During a production meeting at the Makoszowy pits in Zabrze, one PPS foreman called labor competition “a big sham” that was only intended “to increase targets.”³⁵ With ordinary miners echoing these sentiments, participation in labor competition at the Makoszowy pits remained low.³⁶ In the same vein, several miners at the Wieczorek pits, once more under the influence of a well-known PPS activist, refused to go back to work after a shop floor meeting devoted to the theme of

labor competition. And at the Wirek pits in Ruda Śląska, foremen simply withheld the bonuses from participants in labor competition.³⁷

As this last episode shows, the hostility of more experienced workers increasingly turned toward the poster boys of and participants in labor competition. In the first place, this concerned the labor heroes themselves. The security services noted how “anonymous letters and threats are commonly sent to leading miners” like Pstrowski.³⁸ Yet, there were certainly also elements of intergenerational struggle involved. For labor competition was conceived by the government not only as a means to increase production but also to give younger and politically more pliable workers a foothold in traditional industries. Those youngsters willing to engage in labor competition would therefore quickly find themselves branded dupes. “In a while,” one miner at the Makoszowy pits told young participants in labor competition in December 1947, “you will be working for a slice of bread under the supervision of the ZWM [the PPR youth organization that was pivotal in supplying youngsters for the labor competitions], which will constantly be cracking the whip just like in the Soviet Union.”³⁹ As young workers continued to flood the Silesian coal mines over the months that followed, however, their presence increasingly came to be seen as an existential threat to the established working class. Towards the end of 1948, rumors even circulated in the region that “old workers will be axed,” in order for them to be replaced by “youngsters who will work nine shifts per week.”⁴⁰

Such wild (and unfounded) rumors were certainly linked to the charged political atmosphere of the time. As the PPR forced the PPS into a merger in December 1948, leading to the creation of the new PZPR that would rule Poland for the next four decades, the main conduit for worker resistance to the Sovietization of the shop floor disappeared. Henceforth, dissatisfaction over pay and conditions would have to be vented within the Communist movement. And in 1949, there was plenty to be dissatisfied about for Silesian coal miners, as there was a distinct feeling that life had gotten worse ever since the communists had the government to themselves. When the slogans that workers were supposed to espouse during the upcoming May Day celebrations at the Pstrowski pits (the Jadwiga pits, where Pstrowski had worked, had been named after him following his death) were discussed in April 1949, one PZPR member and former socialist chairman of the works council argued that all the official slogans were “falsehoods,” and that the banners should instead read “people have nothing to eat and will be going hungry.”⁴¹ If actual starvation was rare at the time, a September 1949 trade union report from Będzin also picked up on popular discontent over “the shortages of first necessities including fat and meat, for which there are still long queues.” As the Three Year Plan was drawing to a close, voices were growing louder that the promised ten percent advance on prewar living standards had not been delivered. These sort of sentiments, concluded the report, were expressed “even by party members.”⁴²

The strikes

It is against this background that we must understand the April 1951 events in the Dąbrowa basin. With the introduction of large-scale labor competition, the Three Year Plan (1947–1950) had already represented a serious affront to the traditions of Silesian coal miners. In its efforts to emulate the Soviet model, i.e., breakneck industrialization by completely subordinating popular consumption to capital investment, the Six Year Plan (1950–1955) breached the social contract between the state and coal miners still further. To meet ever-increasing production targets, the labor rhythm in the coal mines was continuously intensified. The early 1950s saw new wage scales, each with a stronger emphasis on individual performance and with upwardly-adjusted targets, introduced in rapid succession. More and more pits forced miners to pick up extraordinary shifts on Sundays and (religious) holidays, a most delicate issue in a region where the common Catholic identity had historically been the glue holding the different nationalities that lived side by side in Silesia together.⁴³ In combination with the increasingly common *rolki*, the infamous sixteen-hour double shifts, this saw the total number of monthly shifts per miner rise above thirty-five at some pits.⁴⁴

The excessive burdens that the state placed upon miners had already resulted in a series of isolated protests and strikes during 1950. In January, the question of the Sunday shift triggered a strike at the Anna pits in Pszów. During a shop floor meeting, a PZPR member had spoken out against working on Sundays. To repeated applause from his colleagues, he argued that Sunday was a day of rest, and that work should be organized in such a manner that the plan could be met during weekdays. The following Sunday, miners did turn up for the scheduled extraordinary shift but refused to go to work.⁴⁵ In Sosnowiec, meanwhile, the Stalin pits became the focal point of what the security services labeled “hostile activity.” In the first place, there was much vitriol against those workers who were seen as complicit in the state’s production drive. Anonymous threats had been sent both to a participant in labor competition and to a foreman who had been particularly insistent that targets were met.⁴⁶ That there was more than just words to these threats was borne out when, after the completion of a shift, another participant in labor competition was attacked in the street by four men who tried to throw him into the river.⁴⁷ In response to this incident, the security services stepped up surveillance around the Stalin pits, but this could not prevent another “hostile agitation” developing on its premises when new production targets were introduced in November 1950.⁴⁸

What these episodes already show, is that the nucleus of resistance to the regime was increasingly shifting to the older militants and historical strongholds of the labor movement. More and more often it was party members, usually those with a long pedigree of activism dating back to the interwar years, who were the driving force behind industrial protest. In the coal sector, such long-standing activists were, to a significant extent, concentrated in the Dąbrowa

basin. Its long tradition of industrial struggle found its reflection in the new names, which came to replace their old “capitalist” designation, that were given to some of the most prominent pits. Having been known as the Renard pits before the war, and after a brief interlude during which they had been called the Sosnowiec pits, the Stalin pits were named after the Soviet leader in 1949. That this “honor” befell these pits was linked to the radical reputation its miners had earned when they had sustained one of the longest-running work stoppages during the miners’ strike of February and March 1932. By the same token, the Saturn pits in Czeladź (Będzin), which had been at the forefront of the 1905, 1918, and 1936 strike waves, were renamed Czerwona Gwardia (Red Guard) in 1950; after the workers’ militias that had spearheaded the Communist efforts to unleash a proletarian revolution in the Dąbrowa basin after the First World War. Such pits, and their miners, were often invoked and much cherished in the hagiography that Stalinist Poland created for itself. Yet, it was exactly these pits that would turn against the regime in April 1951.

That was because the directive that the Ministry of Mining had issued in late March, to lengthen shifts in the mines from eight to nine hours, flew directly in the face of some of the hardest-fought and proudest historical struggles of the coal miners of the Dąbrowa basin. The idea behind the extension, packaged as a new form of “cyclical” labor competition borrowed from the Soviet Union,⁴⁹ was to increase production by eliminating downtime between shifts.

For even if Silesian coal mines were in operation around the clock, with three eight-hour shifts, the first and final thirty minutes of each shift were reserved for the descent down and ascent up the shaft, respectively, meaning that there was no extraction for three hours each day. Under the new system, therefore, miners were required to extract coal for eight hours, and thus effectively remain underground for nine. For obvious reasons, the argument that this was somehow not a departure from the principle of the eight-hour working day, which had been enshrined into law in 1918 following a decades-long struggle in which the coal miners of the Dąbrowa basin had played a central role, utterly failed to convince miners.

The modus operandi of the Ministry of Mining suggests that it had already expected a backlash among coal miners. For “Operation W” was shrouded in secrecy: there had been no announcements on the radio or in the newspapers, as was usual with major changes to pay or conditions, nor had there been any general assemblies on the shop floor. In fact, even the paid-up party functionaries in the pits—i.e., the chairmen of works councils and executives of PZPR cells—were only informed on March 27 or March 28 of what stood about to happen. Their response was mostly negative. One party functionary at the Wirek pits warned that, if he would have to bring this news to miners, he would find himself in danger of being pickaxed.⁵⁰ In order to assuage such fears, it was decided to still keep ordinary miners in the dark about the pending change to their hours. Instead, meetings of especially selected shop floor party activists, who had been hand-picked on the basis of their supposed political reliability, were convened on March 29. The aim was for these activists

to accept the new hours in name of the entire workforce, thereby presenting other miners with a *fait accompli*.⁵¹

This scheme backfired spectacularly and nowhere more so than in the Dąbrowa basin. For the activists' meetings did not unfold according to the pattern, which had become the norm in Stalinist Poland. In the increasingly repressive political atmosphere, such meetings had mostly turned into sterile affairs during which party directives were voted through unanimously and participants in labor competition would be expected to make "commitments" to outperform their targets. This time, however, "heated discussions" between supporters and opponents of the measure broke out at many pits. Only at these pits that were behind on their production targets and where management had already (and unilaterally) introduced longer hours to make up for the shortfall did the plans get a more neutral response.⁵²

None of these pits were situated in the Dąbrowa basin, however, where the eight-hour working day still constituted an article of faith for coal miners. In fact, when management at the Czerwona Gwardia pits, which were also behind on their targets, had tried to extend working hours earlier in March, its workforce had successfully managed to resist the measure by clocking out *en masse* after seven hours of extraction.⁵³ Needless to say, the government directive to prolong shifts got a most unfriendly reception at the activists' meetings in the Dąbrowa basin. The internal bulletin of the Silesian PZPR spoke of "demagogical and even hostile responses on the part of party members" in the basin. Even party functionaries, who had already been informed of the measure the previous days and had been instructed to defend it vigorously during the meetings, had shown themselves "passive." At the Milowice pits in Sosnowiec, for example, those functionaries who had been specifically "prepped for the discussion" had refused to take the floor, thereby contributing to the "demobilizing character" of the meeting.⁵⁴

What was worse, word that shifts were about to be lengthened now quickly got out to the shop floor. This news had already triggered a series of agitations in the coal mines of the Dąbrowa basin during the final days of March. Miners at the Grodziec pits in Będzin had "shown themselves greatly agitated" on March 29 and refused to work longer than 7.5 hours (i.e., 6.5 hours of actual extraction). Amid a chorus of worker complaints about low earnings, the poor organization of work, and current management at the pits, one miner was arrested for "inciting ferment" and making "extremely hostile statements." Elsewhere, worker outrage over the extension of working hours was already spilling over into violence or sabotage. There had been a brawl between a supporter and an opponent of the measure at the Kazimierz-Juliusz pits in Sosnowiec. There were no fewer than six outages reported at the Czerwona Gwardia pits on 29 March. And rumors were going around that the managing director of the General Zawadzki pits had been beaten up by miners after they had learned about the nine-hour shifts.⁵⁵

In these circumstances, and in a last-ditch attempt to get the plans approved by miners, the party authorities decided to call shop floor meetings open to the

entire workforce. Rather than organizing general assemblies, though, they convened miners by squad and told them that the longer hours would be scrapped only if each squad voted against the measure separately.⁵⁶ If these clear attempts at manipulation cowed some squads into submission, many of the meetings turned into extremely rowdy affairs. There were countless complaints about poor living standards in “People’s Poland.” During the meeting of the fourth squad at the Czerwona Gwardia pits, one miner had held up a loaf of bread and asked: “What are we working for? For stale bread.”⁵⁷ Miners often framed such grievances in the official vocabulary of the regime. “During the fascist era, the miner worked for fourteen days each month and built his house,” reminisced one of them about the interwar years,⁵⁸ whereas nowadays “he works for thirty days each month and cannot even buy himself a shirt.”⁵⁹

As the managers and/or party bosses who chaired the meetings kept insisting on implementing the new timetable, the mood among the assembled miners quickly soured. At the Kazimierz-Juliusz pits, speakers were repeatedly heckled by miners shouting “we do not want a nine-hour shift.” At the Jowisz pits, meanwhile, one of the squad meetings had to be abandoned after two miners had behaved “aggressively” and “spouted abuse” at some members of the ZMP (the PZPR youth organization, which had come to replace the ZWP after the merger between the PPR and the PPS) who had tried to make production commitments.⁶⁰ There, where a vote could be taken, the measure was often met with a resounding “no” from the miners. Or, as one miner and PZPR member put it rather vividly: “Even if you were to cut off my head, I will still not work longer.”⁶¹

This sense of determination to resist the nine-hour shift would only grow stronger over the following days. Accounts of the conversations that miners held between themselves after the squad meetings show an increasing resolve not to let the regime tarnish the memory of the historical struggles that had been fought by the coal miners of the Dąbrowa basin. “When the directive for miners to work nine hours reached the Czerwona Gwardia pits,” one participant in the strikes later testified, “my colleagues argued that they would not work [nine-hour shifts] and that no one could force them to do so.” It had “after all been their fathers who had fought for the seven-hour day [i.e. eight-hour shifts with seven hours of extraction] and we will not allow them to run roughshod over the red victory that our fathers have won.”⁶² If few veterans of the struggles that had led to the enactment of the eight-hour working day in 1918 were still around by 1951, many miners had personal recollections of the interwar campaigns to reduce the working day in the mines by another hour. Time and again, therefore, miners stressed that, whereas they had fought for a six-hour day under capitalism, the “socialist” state now demanded they would work for nine hours.⁶³

Just how important such attachments to historical struggles were in triggering the strikes becomes clear from another testimony that recounted a conversation, held on the day before the occupational strike between some of the miners who would play a leading role during the occupation broke out at

the Czerwona Gwardia pits. Jan B., an older and experienced miner took the lead in the discussion, explaining how he had fought for a six-hour working day before the war and therefore refused to work for nine hours. He went on to argue that he had already organized strikes during the interwar years and knew from that experience that, if miners closed ranks and stood firm, the government would have no choice but to withdraw the measure. If, on the other hand, miners accepted the new timetable, they would quickly find themselves confronted with fresh demands to work even longer hours. Turning directly to his colleagues, B. concluded that “if we do not work the extra hour, the working day will not be lengthened.”⁶⁴ Such pleas from the old stalwarts of the interwar labor movement were pivotal in convincing younger newcomers to the industrial working class, who had entered the mines in large numbers after the war, to join the strikes. The first to respond to B.’s appeal was one Kazimierz M., a younger PZPR member born in a small rural village in Central Poland, who declared that he, “despite having only worked at the pits for a short time,” agreed not to work the additional hour. The following day, M. would be instrumental in staging the occupation of the Czerwona Gwardia pits.⁶⁵ In the same vein, a report on the occupation of the Grodziec pits noted how young graduates of the Schools of Industrial Training, which were founded in 1949 to prepare youngsters from a peasant background for a career in industry, had been “stirred up” over the longer hours by older miners. When the new timetable was implemented during the early shift on April 2 (April 1 had been a rare free Sunday), some thirty of these graduates and other young miners had ended their work after seven hours of extraction and taken to the shaft. As their request for a lift cage to bring them to the surface was denied, the entire workforce decided to abandon its work and stay underground until the new timetable was rescinded.⁶⁶

Over the next days, the Dąbrowa basin would see the revival of interwar traditions of industrial struggle as thousands of miners were involved in occupational (and regular) strikes. The sit-in strike itself was a proud tradition of the Polish working class, and was indeed known abroad as “the Polish strike” after becoming “the typical form of struggle” of Polish workers in the 1930s.⁶⁷ Especially in the coal sector, where contact with the outside world represented a major challenge for miners occupying their pits, such strikes had always relied on the support of the wider community. Much like the pit occupations of the 1930s,⁶⁸ and in marked contrast to the leading role that women had played during the miners’ strikes in the aftermath of the war, that support system was provided primarily by miners’ wives. Over the course of the more drawn-out occupations of the Czerwona Gwardia and Jowisz pits, miners’ wives would form an informal picket outside the pits both to supply their husbands with food packages and to force those miners who tried to abandon the occupations to return underground. In this sense, the occupational strikes reaffirmed traditional gendered hierarchies in a male pushback not only against of the more self-confident attitudes that women had taken following the liberation but also against of the Stalinist state’s efforts to feminize heavy industry.⁶⁹

Down in the pits older hierarchies and practices were restored too, as the Communist new order on the shop floor briefly went into reverse. The singing of the nineteenth-century religious and patriotic verse *Boże coś Polskę* (God, Thou hast Poland), including the line “Let us return to our free motherland, Lord” which had been added to the song under the Nazi occupation, by the miners occupying the Jowisz pits must be understood not only as an expression of resistance to Soviet domination over Poland but also in the context of “godless” or “Jewish”⁷⁰ communism forcing the Sunday shift upon miners.⁷¹ In a highly symbolic move, moreover, the portraits of the hated “work leaders,” who had been decorated for their extraordinary performances during labor competitions, were torn from the gates of the occupied pits.⁷²

If the occupations themselves were steeped in the traditions of the Polish working class, the regime could also invoke these traditions, as well as the sense of pride and community spirit that informed them, to bring the occupations to an end. As news of the strikes reached Warsaw, several high-ranking officials were hastily dispatched to the Dąbrowa basin to try and pacify the situation. The most prominent of these were Mieczysław Lesz, the vice-minister of mining, and Edward Gierek, who was at the time attending a two-year party course in Warsaw.

Gierek was sent specifically to talk to the miners occupying the Kazimierz-Juliusz pits, as he had been born in the area and these were the pits where his father had worked and died following an accident in 1917. In interviews conducted by his biographer, Gierek recounted how he was initially met with much hostility as he arrived underground without news of any concession on the new timetable. “What do you want, you bastard,” miners had screamed at him. When some miners had subsequently yelled “down the shaft with him,” however, Gierek had seen an opportunity to seize the moment. “Who do you want to throw down the shaft, me?” he responded in the local dialect. “Here where so much blood of my ancestors has already been shed, here where my father and grandfather, my blood, perished; and now you want to throw me down the shaft!” As the noise gradually died down, he belatedly: “Gierek is my name, my roots lie here, you know I am telling you the truth.” Having established his credentials as one of them, Gierek went on to explain to the assembled how these strikes were different from the glorious struggles that miners had fought in the past. “Do you think only you know how to organize strikes?” he asked the miners. “I too have organized strikes and taken a beating for that,” he asserted, “but when I organized strikes that was against the enemy, against the capitalist, whereas we will all pay for your strike.” This apparently struck a chord with the miners, Gierek notes, as “they started listening to me and ask questions, and so, after a couple of hours of persuasion and discussion, they agreed to abandon the occupation.”⁷³

Vice-minister Lesz’s intervention with the miners occupying the Jowisz pits unfolded along similar lines. At first, his pleas for miners to accept the new hours and abandon the occupation fell on deaf ears. In fact, the delegation led by Lesz, which also included leaders of the provincial PZPR and the Coal Miner’s Union,

found itself pelted with coal by the miners. The mood changed, however, after one over-excited miner threatened to flood the pits if the new timetable was not rescinded. This remark immediately drew the censure of his colleagues and allowed Lesz to seize the initiative. “Only a Hitler supporter [*hitlerowiec*] or class enemy talks like that,” he responded. Turning to the other miners, he then explained: “look, comrades, he wants to rob us of our bread, for the mines are our source of food.” This appeal on the pride that miners took in having defended their pits against destruction by the retreating Wehrmacht⁷⁴ and in their role as provider for the nation had the desired effect. As one of the strike leaders later testified, Lesz’s words “broke the spirit among miners” who “completely lost the will to continue with the strike.”⁷⁵

Events played out differently, though, during the underground encounter between Lesz and striking miners at the Czerwona Gwardia pits. That was linked to things that were happening at the surface, where some 120 women had gathered to help sustain the occupation. After these women physically assaulted five miners who had tried to flee the scene and forced them to descend once more, cadres of the provincial party school were mobilized to clear out the premises.⁷⁶ Just as Lesz had finished his speech and was taking questions from miners, two miners who had been charged with going back-and-forth between the surface and the underground to collect and distribute the food packages emerged from the lift cage and shouted: “colleagues and brothers, suits [*krawaciorze*] are beating up our wives and children.”⁷⁷ The wrath of the miners immediately turned on the vice-minister, who had to run for his life as he was chased to the lift cage. After a battered and bruised Lesz had made it to the surface, many miners wanted to leave to check up on their families. Yet, the strike leaders convinced them that miners would be an easy prey for the security services if they started leaving in small groups. It was only when the military moved in, and an army commander pressed miners to abandon the site once more, that miners agreed to bring the occupation to an end in the early hours of April 4.⁷⁸

The aftermath

The military “pacification” at the Czerwona Gwardia pits spelled the end for the strike movement. In the weeks that followed, there would still be some isolated incidents over the new timetable, with a small group of miners leaving their work prematurely at the General Zawadzki pits⁷⁹ and miners at the Stalin pits complaining that there would be no need for the longer hours if work was organized properly.⁸⁰ For the most part, however, the miners of the Dąbrowa basin had been browbeaten into submission. During a fresh round of shop floor meetings in mid-April, those who dared to take the floor overwhelmingly came out in favor of the new timetable, as individual and collective commitments to outperform targets in the run-up to the May Day celebrations were duly made.⁸¹ The reckoning with the leaders of the strikes, meanwhile, was getting underway. Contrary to the promises made by Gierek and other PZPR

officials visiting the occupied pits, several miners were arrested and sentenced to up to two years in labor camps.

If the regime had thus won its inevitable victory over working hours in the pits, it was by no means satisfied about the way in which that victory had come about. Among provincial and national PZPR leaders, there was particular concern over the resistance they had encountered from party members and party structures in the Dąbrowa basin. Already during the implementation of “Operation W,” the internal bulletin of the Silesian PZPR complained that the operation had “revealed many shortcomings” not only with regard to its preparation but also in “the structure and deployment of party organizations.”⁸² After quelling the strikes, therefore, the PZPR leadership set about to make sure it would never again be defied by its rank-and-file activists and its grassroots bodies in the Dąbrowa basin. As part of a wide-ranging purge that began already in April, the entire PZPR organization at the Czerwona Gwardia pits, as well as three lower-level party cells at the Jowisz pits, were dissolved. In addition, the Silesian PZPR sent out special teams of trained activists to rebuild or strengthen party organizations at the Czeladź, Czerwona Gwardia, Generał Zawadzki, Grodziec, Jowisz, Kazimierz-Juliusz, Klimontów, Stalin, and Wieczorek pits.⁸³

In fact, even the PZPR Central Committee weighed in on the “mistakes” that had caused the strike wave. In early May, it sent an open letter to local party members in Będzin, home to the Czerwona Gwardia and Jowisz pits, which became mandatory food for discussion during shop floor and local party meetings across the Silesian coalfield. If the letter blamed the strikes on a “fifth column” of “agents of American imperialism” and various domestic “fascist” organizations, it also lamented how rank-and-file activists in the Dąbrowa basin had become “detached from grassroots miners.”⁸⁴ At the meetings where the letter was discussed, local and provincial party leaders listed a whole series of shortcomings. The letter from the Central Committee, explained the chairman of the local PZPR branch in Dąbrowa Górnicza during its annual conference, pointed to “deficiencies” in the role the party had played on the shop floor: Local communists had not “monitored the mood among the masses” and “failed to respond to the criticism of the masses,” worker assemblies had been “a rarity,” and there was “a lack of concern for the needs and the ailments of workers.”⁸⁵

If such general statements might still be read as a nod to the grievances of the strikers, it quickly became clear which sort of workers the PZPR leadership felt had been failed by communist activists in the Dąbrowa basin: those younger migrants from the surrounding provinces who were more willing to do the regime’s bidding in the pits (make longer hours, participate in labor competition, work on Sundays, etc.) in the hope of making a career for themselves. The letter of the Central Committee already decried the “bureaucratic attitude” that local party organizations had taken to the social and housing needs of these groups, by, e.g., failing to hand out protective clothing or their “woeful neglect” of workers’ hotels.⁸⁶ This was part of a wider antipathy toward those groups

from which the regime hoped to create a new proletariat. Much like in Stalinist Hungary, where the aristocracy of labor found itself accused of taking “chauvinistic attitudes” toward new recruits to industrial life,⁸⁷ there were all sorts of complaints about how shop floor activists behaved toward newcomers to the Dąbrowa basin. Works councils in Dąbrowa Górnicza were scolded for their failure to look after the interests of participants in labor competition.⁸⁸ At the Milowice pits, similarly, there was “an improper and detrimental attitude towards labor competition,” which had seen one “brigade” of young miners fail to meet its production commitment despite working thirty shifts per month.⁸⁹ These problems in the implementation of new production methods were frequently linked to the age structure of the PZPR in the Dąbrowa basin. More than half of party members at the General Zawadzki pits were over the age of fifty, explained the chairman of its PZPR organization, and were mostly set in their ways.⁹⁰ This made for an unwelcoming environment for the many rural youngsters who, freshly-trained in Soviet production methods, flocked to the Dąbrowa basin. Party leaders in Sosnowiec found themselves forced to express self-criticism for showing “not nearly enough attention to the recruitment of young and healthy elements hailing from the ZMP.” In fact, out of a total of six hundred ZMP members who had moved to the town, only three hundred had joined the local PZPR branch.⁹¹

The traditional working-class PZPR branches in the Dąbrowa basin were thus increasingly out of step with an overall Communist movement that was getting younger and more rural in background. The occupational strikes of April 1951 represented a turning point in this respect. In the wake of the strikes, many older party activists would turn their back on the PZPR. Some activists, including the chairman of a PZPR cell at the Milowice pits,⁹² simply stopped paying their membership dues. Others refused to attend the shop floor meetings where the letter of the PZPR Central Committee was discussed, and where participants in the strikes were expected to engage in self-criticism, thereby setting in motion a process that would lead to their expulsion from the party.⁹³

Even those veteran activists who stood by the PZPR, out of a sense of emotional attachment more than anything else, were increasingly left with a sense of utter bewilderment about a Communist movement that was changing before their eyes. A report of a shop floor meeting at the Stalin pits, called to discuss the letter of the PZPR Central Committee, notes how those activists who had already been members of the interwar Polish Communist Party (KPP) were “visibly shocked” by the news that the PZPR organization at the Czerwona Gwardia pits had been dissolved. “Before the war,” one of them had commented, “the party had to work in difficult circumstances and comrades had to fight to belong to it.” These days, by contrast, “when there is one great party and everyone can join one of its organizations, it has gotten to the point where the organization at the Czerwona Gwardia pits has to be dissolved.”⁹⁴

The party that such activists had joined during the interwar years, and whose struggles they so cherished, had ceased to exist, however. In the

aftermath of the occupational strikes in the Dąbrowa basin, the PZPR made it quite clear that its allegiance no longer lay with the historic struggles fought by its coal miners. It did so during a series of highly symbolic sessions at the Czerwona Gwardia and Jowisz pits that, as Gierek later recalled, “had something of a religious rite. At a big meeting of all party members, the names of the expelled members were read out one after another; those whose names had been called had to get up, walk to the platform, and surrender their party cards.”⁹⁵

Conclusion

In a very real sense, therefore, the strikes had transformed what it meant to be a Communist or labor movement activist in the Dąbrowa basin. Compared to the two other major coal regions in Upper Silesia, around the city of Bytom and in the conurbation of Zabrze and Gliwice, the Dąbrowa basin found itself confronted with that transformation only at a very late stage. For whereas other parts of Upper Silesia had gone through massive demographic changes in the immediate aftermath of the war—i.e., the expulsion of the sizeable German minority and subsequent efforts to repopulate the area by encouraging Poles of widely divergent backgrounds to migrate to it—the predominantly Polish working class in the Dąbrowa basin had remained in place. During the first postwar years, accordingly, the provincial authorities had mostly focused their attention on managing the often tense relations between the various groups in these melting pots,⁹⁶ leaving the Dąbrowa basin to its own devices. In fact, when the letter of the Central Committee was discussed at the Wujek pits in Katowice, one party activist argued that the provincial PZPR had to take its share of the blame for the events in the Dąbrowa basin. The provincial committee had “apparently thought that there was no need to look after the pits in the Dąbrowa basin like it looked after pits in other parts of Silesia,” he noted, “because it considers the Dąbrowa basin to be red and to have a revolutionary tradition.”⁹⁷

Much as the regime liked to pretend otherwise, the occupational strikes of April 1951 were, of course, wholly in line with the red and revolutionary traditions of the Dąbrowa basin. What this article has demonstrated is that these traditions were pivotal not only in triggering the strikes but also helped bring them to an end. None of this is to deny that the crushing powers, which the Stalinist state had at its disposal, had a significant impact on the unfolding of the occupations. As the occupation of the Czerwona Gwardia pits went into the night, one of the older veterans already prophesized that “nothing good” would come of the strike. For these times were “different from the prewar era,” he explained, “when it was possible to form a committee and organize a strike.”⁹⁸ Yet, as this article has shown, persuasion and the invocation of traditions were often more effective means to defuse the situation than sheer force. In fact, when the state turned to violence against the women guarding the entrance to the Czerwona Gwardia pits, it brought the conflict back onto a terrain that miners knew all

too well from their interwar struggles; thereby prolonging the occupation and forcing the regime to deploy, for the first and certainly not the last time in the history of “People Poland,” its weapon of last resort.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the German Historical Institute in Warsaw for its generous support of the archival research that went into this article and Małgorzata Fidelis for sharing with me an important archival source that was unavailable (due to re-cataloguing) during my research stay in Poland. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers, whose insightful comments and suggestions have done much to improve the article.

2. These numbers are derived from the open letter that the Central Committee of the Polish Communist Party sent to party organizations in Będzin in the wake of the occupational strikes. See “List KC PZPR do członków partii powiatu Będzińskiego” in: *O budownictwie partyjnym. Uchwały KC PZPR 1949-1953*, 225 (Warsaw, 1954).

3. The strikes make a brief appearance in R.F. Leslie, *The History of Poland since 1863*, 316 (Cambridge, 1980); Andrzej Paczkowski, *The Spring will be Ours: Poland and the Poles from Occupation to Freedom*, 236–37 (University Park, PA, 2003). Both of these accounts do not even elaborate on the direct cause of the strikes, though.

4. Michał Kozak, “Strajki górników w 1951 r.,” *Mowią Wieki 37/1* (1994): 43–46.

5. Andrzej Paczkowski, *Strajki, bunt, manifestacje jako ‘polska droga’ przez socjalizm*, 46–47 (Poznań, 2003); Jędrzej Chumiński, *Ruch zawodowy w Polsce w warunkach kształtującego się system totalitarnego, 1944-1956*, 389–90 (Wrocław, 1999).

6. See, e.g., Jerzy Eisler, *Siedmiu wspaniałych. Poczet pierwszych sekretarzy KC PZPR*, 262–64 (Warsaw, 2014); Janusz Rolicki, *Edward Gierek. Życie i narodiny legendy*, 58–59 (Warsaw, 2002).

7. Janusz Rolicki and Edward Gierek, *Przerwana dekada*, (Warsaw, 1990).

8. One notable exception is the work that Małgorzata Fidelis has done on the strike wave in Żyrardów. In this textile town near Warsaw, the predominantly female workforce staged a series of strikes during 1950 and 1951 to protest poor living standards. Yet, as Fidelis explains, such women-led strikes were often a wholly different proposition from (and were met with a wholly different response by the authorities compared to) strikes in male-dominated industries. Małgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*, 82–98 (Cambridge, 2010).

9. Łukasz Kamiński, *Polacy wobec nowej rzeczywistości, 1944-1948* (Toruń, 2000), 64–147.

10. That is at least how Padraic Kenney describes the book in a wide-ranging review article on modern Poland. Padraic Kenney, “After the Blank Spots Are Filled: Recent Perspectives on Modern Poland,” *The Journal of Modern History* 79/1 (2007): 134–61, 155.

11. Dariusz Jarosz, *Polacy a stalinizm, 1948-1956*, 93 (Warsaw, 2000).

12. Hubert Wilk, “Propaganda współzawodnictwa pracy,” *Polska 1944/1945-1989. Studia i materiały* 7 (2005): 153–75, 174.

13. The “Polish road to socialism” is primarily associated with the figure of Władysław Gomułka, First Secretary of the (Communist) Polish Workers’ Party from 1943 to 1948 (and subsequently of its successor from 1956 to 1970). It envisioned a more gradual trajectory towards socialism that was in line with national traditions and would not necessarily follow the precepts of the Soviet model. See: Andrzej Werblan, *Władysław Gomułka, sekretarz generalny PPR*, (Warsaw, 1988); Inessa Iazhborovskaia, “The Gomułka Alternative: The Untravelled Road,” in: *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe* ed. Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii, 123–38 (Boulder, 1997).

14. On the former theme see e.g.: Sandrine Kott, *Communism Day-to-Day: State Enterprises in East German Society*, (Ann Arbor, 2014); Peter Heumos, “State Socialism, Egalitarianism, Collectivism: On the Social Context of Socialist Work Movements in Czechoslovak Industrial and Mining Enterprises, 1945-1968,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 68 (2005): 47–74; Mark Pittaway, “The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture, and the State in Early Socialist Hungary,” *The Journal of Modern History* 72/4 (2002): 737–69; . On the latter theme, see various essays in: *Mastery*

and *Lost Illusions: Space and Time in the Modernization of Eastern and Central Europe* ed. Włodzimierz Borodziej, Stanislav Holubec, and Joachim von Puttkamer (Munich, 2014).

15. Hugo Service, *Germans to Poles: Communism, Nationalism and Ethnic Cleansing after the Second World War*, (Cambridge, 2013); Gregor Thum, *Die fremde Stadt. Breslau 1945* (Berlin, 2003).

16. Sándor Horváth, *Stalinism Reloaded: Everyday Life in Stalin-City, Hungary*, (Bloomington, 2017); Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949-1956* (Ithaca, 2013).

17. Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945-1950* (Ithaca, 1997).

18. On the strikes in the Dąbrowa basin in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War: Tomasz Gonet, "Strajkowe lato 1945 w 'Czerwonym Zagłębiu,'" *Czasypismo o historii Górnośląska* (2012): 112–17.

19. Archiwum Akt Nowych, Warsaw (hereafter AAN), Polska Partia Robotnicza. Komitet Centralny w Warszawie (hereafter KC PPR), 295/XIII-39, fos 67–69.

20. This was a key feature of the (wildcat) strike movements that swept industrial regions across postwar Europe. See: Jan De Graaf, "The Wildcat Strikes after World War Two: A Social History Interpretation (1945-1953)," in: *Unité et convergences de l'action syndicale internationale au XX siècle*, ed. Alexandre Bibert and Sylvain Schirmann, 87–101 (Paris, 2019); Jan De Graaf, "No Italian Stalingrads. The C.G.I.L. and the Working Class in the Northern Industrial Heartlands, 1945-1955," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 23/5 (2018): 620–39.

21. Instytut Pamięci Narodowe, Warsaw (hereafter IPN BU), 1572-312, fo. 63.

22. Padraic Kenney has explained how the (Communist-dominated) security services tended to blame (supposed) political enemies for strikes and other manifestations of industrial unrest, but could offer precious little evidence to support these claims. Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland*, 43.

23. For two examples from the 1930s see: Henryk Rechowicz, *Dwa strajki*, (Katowice, 1959).

24. Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach (hereafter APK), 1749 Komitet Miejski Polskiej Partii Robotniczej w Dąbrowie Górniczej, Sygn. 35, fo. 20.

25. See e.g. Gonet, "Strajkowe lato," 114; IPN BU 01206/41.1, fo. 286.

26. I have dealt with these themes in far greater detail in: Jan De Graaf, "Frauen und wilde Streiks im Europa der Nachkriegszeit," *Arbeit - Bewegung - Geschichte* 18/3 (2019): 13–33.

27. Instytut Pamięci Narodowe, Katowice (hereafter IPN KA), 259-285, fo. 1.

28. Jędrzej Chumiński has calculated that, even as late as 1955, real wages in the coal mining sector stood at only 94 percent of their prewar levels. Jędrzej Chumiński, "The Material Situation of Polish Workers Between 1945 and 1956," *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae* 32 (2014): 25–47, 45.

29. IPN BU, 01206/41.3, fo. 53.

30. IPN BU, 01206/41.3, fo. 1.

31. The concept of the "aristocracy of labor" was probably coined by Engels, but became widely known through the work of Lenin as a segment of the working class that had managed to improve its position under capitalism by pursuing narrow and selfish craft-based interests. In postwar Eastern Europe, the Stalinist regimes mostly came to use it as a derogatory term for skilled workers who were opposed to Soviet production methods and attached to prewar forms of shop floor representation. Eric Hobsbawm, "Lenin and the 'Aristocracy of Labor,'" *Monthly Review* 64/7 (2012): 26-34; Mark Pittaway, "Workers in Hungary," in: *Power and the People: A History of Central European Politics, 1945-1956*, ed. Eleonore Breuning, Jill Lewis, and Gareth Pritchard, 57–75 (Manchester, 2005).

32. AAN, KC PPR, 295/IX-124, fo. 144.

33. IPN BU, 01206/41.2, fo.63.

34. IPN BU, 01206/41.3 fos. 59–60

35. IPN KA, 0103/39/1, fo. 23.

36. IPN BU, 01206/41.2, fo. 78.

37. IPN BU, 01206/41.2, fos 26–27.

38. Quoted in: Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland*, 250.

39. IPN BU 01206/41.2, fo. 78.

40. IPN BU, 01206/41.3, fos 176–77.

41. IPN BU, 01206/41.4, fo. 82.

42. APK, 1793 Wojewódzki Komitet PZPR (hereafter WK PZPR), 7 Wyzd. Socj-Zaw, Sygn. 2, fo. 142.

43. James Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor, 2008).
44. Jarosz, *Polacy*, 72–73.
45. IPN BU, 01206/41.5, fo. 59.
46. IPN BU, 01206/41.5, fo. 35.
47. IPN BU, 01206/41.5, fo. 12.
48. AAN, Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza Komitet Centralny (hereafter KC PZPR), Część I, 237/VII-854, fo. 73.
49. Kozak, “Strajki górników,” 43.
50. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-855, fo. 321.
51. Kozak, “Strajki górników,” 44.
52. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-855, fo. 328.
53. Kozak, “Strajki górników,” 46.
54. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-855, fo. 329.
55. Archiwum Dokumentacji Historycznej PRL (hereafter ADH PRL), Fonds Jozef Olszewski, Materiały KW PZPR w Katowicach dot. sytuacji strajkowej w górnictwie, 1950–51, fos 16–18.
56. Kozak, “Strajki górników,” 44.
57. ADH PRL, Fonds Jozef Olszewski, Materiały KW PZPR w Katowicach dot. sytuacji strajkowej w górnictwie, 1950–51, fo. 18.
58. This was a reference to the 1930s, when Poland was ruled by successive right-wing authoritarian *Sanacja* governments. These governments typically were described as “fascist” in Communist Poland, whereas the term “Nazi” was used to refer to the German occupation.
59. Quoted in: Kozak, “Strajki górników,” 44.
60. ADH PRL, Fonds Jozef Olszewski, Materiały KW PZPR w Katowicach dot. sytuacji strajkowej w górnictwie, 1950–51, fos 17–20.
61. Quoted in: Paczkowski, *Strajki, bunty*, 46.
62. Quoted in: Marcin Kula et al., “Szarzy ludzie zaplątani w codzienności komunizmu,” *Przegląd historyczny* 84/3 (1993): 335–50, 349–50.
63. See, e.g., AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-855, fo. 321; IPN KA, 230/6472, fo. 17. This argument was of course a tad disingenuous, as it contrasted six hours of actual coal extraction (in a seven-hour shift) with a nine-hour shift (with eight hours of actual coal extraction). Nonetheless, the six-versus-nine was juxtaposition was drawn upon repeatedly by party activists and ordinary miners alike.
64. IPN KA, 230/6472, fo. 21.
65. *Ibid.*
66. ADH PRL, Fonds Jozef Olszewski, Materiały KW PZPR w Katowicach dot. sytuacji strajkowej w górnictwie, 1950–51, fos 16–17.
67. See Siegfried Mielke ed., *Internationales Gewerkschaftshandbuch*, 909 (Wiesbaden, 2013).
68. Rechowicz, *Dwa strajki*, 20–22.
69. As part of state-sponsored programs to employ women in what had traditionally been “men’s jobs,” 560 women were working as coal miner in Katowice province by mid-1951. Malgorzata Fidelis, “Equality through Protection: The Politics of Women’s Employment in Postwar Poland, 1945–1956,” *Slavic Review* 63/2 (2004): 301–24, 315.
70. The trope of “Jewish communism” (or *zydokomuna*), i.e., that communism represented a Jewish conspiracy against Christianity, had been widespread in interwar Poland. When the Communists took power in postwar Poland, accordingly, worker protests were often framed in anti-Semitic terms. Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga. Polska 1944–1947*, 49–86 (Warsaw 2012); Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland*, 110–19.
71. In fact, the abolition of the obligation to work on Sundays was one of the three key demands formulated by the miners occupying the Jowisz pits. See Kozak, “Strajki górników,” 45.
72. See Marek Chyliński, “Jak Gierek pacyfikował zagłębiowskie kopalnie,” April 2017. URL: <https://silesion.pl/jak-gierek-pacyfikowal-zaglebiowskie-kopalnie-03-04-2017> (last consulted: September 23, 2018).
73. Rolicki and Gierek, *Przerwana dekada*, 28.
74. These efforts, which saw miners disbar German military engineers from their pits and refuse to carry out commands to blow up their boiler houses, were much celebrated in Communist Poland. See: Janusz Gołębiowski, *Pierwsze lata 1945–1947*, 59–82 (Katowice, 1974).

75. Quoted in: Kozak, "Strajki górników," 45.
76. ADH PRL, Fonds Jozef Olszewski, Materiały KW PZPR w Katowicach dot. sytuacji strajkowej w górnictwie, 1950–51, fo. 19.
77. IPN KA, 230/6475, fo. 11.
78. IPN KA, 230/6472, fo. 18; IPN KA, 230/6475, fo. 12. The documents do not make clear whether the army commander explicitly threatened the miners with violence, though that is of course always implicit when the military intervenes in an industrial dispute.
79. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-856, fo. 50.
80. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-856, fo. 74.
81. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-856, fos 47–52, 67–69, 74–7.
82. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-855, fo. 330.
83. Kozak, "Strajki górników," 46.
84. "List KC PZPR do członków partii powiatu Będzińskiego," 228–30.
85. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-821, fo. 38.
86. "List KC PZPR do członków partii powiatu Będzińskiego," 230.
87. Pittaway, "Workers in Hungary," 58.
88. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-821, fo. 39.
89. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-829, fos 110–11.
90. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-821, fo. 67.
91. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-829, fos 85, 136.
92. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-829, fo. 108.
93. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-856, fo. 141.
94. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-856, fo. 155.
95. Quoted in Rolicki and Gierek, *Przerwana dekada*, 37.
96. See on this theme: Bartosz Borys, "Stosunek ludności województwa śląskiego do 'władzy ludowej' w latach 1945-1947," *Klio. Czasopismo poświęcone dziejom Polski i powszechnym* 27/4 (2014), 139–60.
97. AAN, KC PZPR, Część I, 237/VII-856, fo. 163.
98. IPN KA, 230/6475, fo. 11.